Glory of the Snow

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Glory of the Snow

by PoorSpoorSusurration

Summary

As Neil fixed his tie in the bathroom mirror, pulling it so tight he was half-certain he'd asphyxiate before the night closed, he seriously regretted telling his father about Knox's connection to the Danburry's. Or, more specifically, Knox's connection to one Dr. Danburry.

Alternatively;

Neil has a dinner scheduled with the Danburry's that he is *absolutely* not looking forward to. Little does he know that the dinner will have an extra guest attending—a "friend" of Ginny's from school, with sandy-blonde hair, powder blue eyes, and a notebook clutched to his chest.

Notes

First fic ever so. uh. if anything is wrong its cause of that

Title is from Glory of the Snow by Clairo and probably all of the chapter titles will also be from Charm by clairo and you should really listen to it it's so good!!!!!

Ok enjoy <3

See the end of the work for more notes

I Can Feel There's Something In The Between

Chapter Summary

> Neil prepares for his dinner with the Danburry's, which apparently involves recollecting on how he ended up in this mess in the first place as well as enough hair gel to kill an infant.

Chapter Notes

> Merry Christmas!!!!!! Have this introduction chapter. as a treat

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Neil fixed his tie in the bathroom mirror, pulling it so tight he was half-certain he'd asphyxiate before the night closed, he seriously regretted telling his father about Knox's connection to the Danburry's. Or, more specifically, Knox's connection to one *Dr*. Danburry.

It had gone as so.

It had been one unassuming Saturday night in the summer, during a terribly bog-standard dinner at the Perry household, decked out with all the staples that Neil had come to expect of such a meal—roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, the most suffocating conversation ever held over decent silverware. No, to call it conversation was far too charitable; *conversation* implied that there was some back-and-forth, polite inquisitions and casual answers coming from *both* sides, some small semblance of equality between the pair speaking.

What it really was (and what it *always* was) was a lecture.

A lecture, consisting of nothing but Neil's father running his son through the script of what would eventually become his life. Stressing how Neil *must* keep up with his summertime curriculum, *must* avoid any and all distractions throughout the upcoming school year, *must* bring home spotless grades and the title of valedictorian—practically

outlining Neil's predetermined path straight from the graduation podium into the cold, cloying walls of a doctor's office. (By way of Harvard, of course. That part needn't even be said.) His father ran through this grand plan of his with his son on a regular basis, as if Neil didn't know it off by heart at this point.

As if Neil couldn't repeat it to himself in his sleep, if he wanted to.

As if Neil couldn't repeat it to himself in his grave, if he wanted to.

That night, Neil could have simply smiled and nodded, as he had always done every single bog-standard Perry household dinner before. But for whatever reason that night—perhaps the muggy summer heat had gotten to him, or the whole day of study had worn the wires of his brain thin, or he had finally scrounged up a miniscule scrap of courage—Neil decided to try something different. He decided that he'd try to change the subject, for once. To have his father talk about anything else with him—or, at least, to have his father to talk *with* him for once, rather than *at* him.

"*You know,*" Neil had begun, picking at the chicken on his plate. "*Knox has also considered studying medicine.*"

Neil's father had looked up from his plate, grey eyes schooled yet curious. "*The Overstreet boy?*" he had huffed. "*I thought his father was a lawyer.*"

"He is. But Knox and his parents were also discussing other options—you know, just in case he wanted to study something that wasn't law."

His father had scoffed at that, and Neil felt his plastered-on smile tighten around the edges. He had thought it had been wonderful that Knox's parents were allowing him some say in his future, but he

should've known better than to think that his father would share the sentiment. He probably thought the whole thing foolhardy.

"*So,*" Neil had continued, stabbing at his peas, "*Knox's parents mentioned studying medicine as a possible idea. It wouldn't be a reach, either, Knox had good grades, and with his parent's connections to the Danburry's, it would—*"

"*The Danburry's?*" Neil's father had interrupted.

"*Oh, the Danburry's are alums of the school,*" Neil had explained. "*Knox's father took one of Mr. Danburry's cases a while back. Something about…*"

He'd scoured his mind, trying to remember his conversation with Knox about the whole situation. Neil honestly hadn't been paying that close of attention throughout it, far more focused on finishing off his algebra homework than on processing the details. Details which had since escaped him, so that he'd been forced to cover his silence at the table with an uncomfortable chuckle.

"*Anyway— Mr. Danburry's a doctor. So if Knox were interested in medicine, his parents said they could arrange for him to have dinner with him.*"

"*And is he?*" Neil's father had inquired, tone pointed in a way that made Neil's skin itch.

"*Is he… sorry sir, I'm not sure I understand…?*"

"*Is he interested in medicine?*"

"*Oh, uh… no, no he isn't. He's still set on law, I think. It was just that the option was… there.*"

"*So…*" Neil's father had set down his fork, dabbed at his mouth with a serviette, and leaned over his plate. His eyes had locked with Neil's, who felt like shrinking backwards at the contact. "*You're saying the Overstreet boy isn't planning on dining with this…* Dr. *Danburry?*"

It was at this exact point that Neil had seen where his father was leading the conversation. His stomach turned as he realised the immensity of his mistake, his mistake being ever trying to stray from the status quo—this is what he got for wanting any amount of variety.

He'd spent the rest of dinner staring down at his plate, trying his best not to saw through it with his knife, wishing that the word 'Danburry' had never left his lips. Neil's father had been all too enthusiastic afterwards, insisting that Neil speak with Knox and arrange his own dinner with the Danburry's. And, he had made a point of adding, not to screw it up as he was so sure Neil would do.

Neil had been practically chased down the hall once dinner was over, hounded towards the phone like a sheep shepherded by a frothing dog. His father hovered in the doorway as he dialled Knox's number (a dial which, to Neil's dismay, had gone through seamlessly), pretending as if he wasn't listening in on every word of the conversation, shooting occasional glances at Neil which made a lump build in the boy's throat. Regrettably, Neil had succeeded in relaying the message to a confused (but *infuriatingly* helpful) Knox on the other line. Knox had spoken with his parents, plans had been set for the beginning of the school term, and now—

Now, Neil was digging his fingers into Charlie's hair gel like it had killed him in a past life. (Which, considering how Charlie preferred to style his hair, was a real possibility.) The product was cool and waxy

on his hands, and it made Neil grimace as he scooped it out of the container and reluctantly slathered it through his hair.

"Is this really necessary, Charlie?" he whined, fixing his hair in the mirror.

"In my humble opinion, Neil?" Charlie called from somewhere behind Neil. "Not in the slightest."

Neil spun on his heel, staring confusedly at Charlie who, currently, was lounging atop Neil's roommate's bed, shoes still on and cigarette between his teeth. Luckily for both of them, Neil's roommate was off somewhere with his friends, an activity he didn't usually return from until five minutes before curfew—luckily for Neil, because that meant that he could have Charlie crowd in his room and help him both physically and mentally prepare for the evening ahead; luckily for Charlie, because Neil's roommate had threatened to fink to Nolan if he ever caught Charlie smoking in his and Neil's room again.

"You really don't think it's necessary?" Neil asked, puzzled. It was a fair question—Charlie had been the one to suggest the hair gel in the first place, after all, having adamantly shoved the tin into Neil's hands only a half hour ago.

"Really." Charlie nodded to himself, knocking ash onto the bedsheets that he quickly brushed onto the floor. "I mean, be honest Neil—what's this one dinner with the *Danburry's* going to do for you? You know, besides bore the tar out of you for the whole night. And make you miss out on study group on top of that. I mean, it's a total waste of time—"

"Charlie," Neil sighed, "I was talking about the hair gel."

“Oh.” Charlie paused. “Oh, well in that case, yes, that stuff’s entirely necessary! Knox could easily get away without it—what with his handsome mug and all—but you?” He kicked his legs over the side of the mattress, resting his feet on the floor and raising himself into a sitting position. “You need all the help you can get, my friend.”

“Terrific,” Neil replied, rolling his eyes.

He spun back around to the mirror hung on the interior of his wardrobe door, adjusting his tie for the hundredth time before continuing on with the sisyphean task of flattening his hair. It took handfuls of Charlie’s horrible gel to keep the tufts of his hair from springing back up, and even then there was one particularly mischievous tuft at the back that refused to stay down. Neil bet that he could go through twenty whole containers of the gel and still not get it to stick to his scalp.

“Need all the help I can get…” he muttered to himself. “You sound just like my father, Dalton. I’m surprised you’re not also raving on about this dinner’s importance to my future.”

“You wound me, Neil.” Neil could hear the bed springs moan in protest as Charlie fell backwards onto the creaky frame in faux injury. “Seriously, Neil, why’re you even going along with this? You don’t want to do it, I don’t want you to do it— Sounds like anyone whose opinion is worth giving a damn about is against the idea.”

“You know *why*,” Neil hummed back to his friend through the forced smile he was practising in the mirror. He took one last scoop of hair gel and slapped it onto the one mischievous tuft, the sensation sending shivers down his spine—but it looked like it might just hold for the night, so Neil was happy with it.

“Yeah, yeah,” Charlie grumbled. “I know damn well why.”

As Neil went to pluck his blazer off of the chair he'd thrown it over, there came a knock at the door. A knock that didn't wait a second for an answer, as the door swung open not a moment later and in spilled the rest of the members of the study group Neil would be missing tonight.

"Woah, looking *good*, Neil," Meeks commented, walking over to stand beside the bed that Charlie was still sprawled upon. Pitts whistled in agreement as he joined them, raising his eyebrows as he passed.

"Yes, yes, I know," Neil responded. "I'm sure to have Mrs. Danburry positively *swooning*." That earned him a good bout of laughter from the other boys filing in.

"Hey, hey!" Charlie called, loudening his voice to be heard over the racket. "Let's be fair here. I've heard the Danburry's have a daughter too, and our age as well." He cast his eyes over to Neil, and winked. "If anyone, *that's* who'd be swooning."

"If she's anything like her brother, you'd better hope not," Knox added, swinging around the chair at Neil's desk so that he could sit facing the group.

"Oh, Chet's been out of your hair for years, Knoxious, get over it," Charlie teased. "He probably doesn't even remember going to Welton at this point— And he *definitely* doesn't remember telling an incredibly gullible, snotty-nosed kid that ghosts haunted the school, right before his first night away from his parents' house."

Neil laughed along with the rest of the study group (minus Knox, of course) as he packed away his clothes and closed the wardrobe doors on their ancient, heavy hinges. He felt just a little bad, though, when

he noticed Knox's ears turning pink as Charlie continued to relay the story which, at this point, they'd all either directly experienced or had heard about enough times to know just as well. So he spoke up before anyone else (Charlie) could get another word in.

"By the way, Knox," Neil cut in, "my father wanted to give you his deepest gratitude for the dinner tonight. And I guess thanks from me, as well."

"Ooh, Thomas Perry's *deepest gratitude*," Charlie parroted. "That's quite the honour, Knoxious."

Knox elected to ignore the goading of the other boy, choosing instead to beam at Neil. "It was no problem, Neil. I mean, if you hadn't asked, I probably would've just gone instead."

"Oh," Neil said, through his gritted teeth. He hadn't been aware that that had been an option. "I thought you weren't interested in medicine?"

"Well, I'm not," Knox confessed. "But still, I would've attended the dinner—the Danburry's are still big alums, you know."

Neil felt his jaw spasm. "So I've been told."

"I'm glad it's you, though," Knox mused. "I wouldn't get much out of it, honestly. And could you imagine *me* trying to impress the Danburry's?"

Knox continued on with the conversation, unaware of the headache that Neil was fighting back. Neil tried his best to smile as best he

could, anyhow—after all, it wasn't *Knox's* fault he was being forced out to dinner with a family he didn't know, for the sake of a future he wasn't particularly looking forward to, playing out a plan he'd had written for him from the moment of his conception. God, Neil hadn't even left yet, and he was already exhausted; he couldn't imagine that tonight would do anything but exhaust him further.

Charlie had been right; it really was a total waste of his time.

But he had to do it, didn't he?

A cough from the doorway interrupted the scattered conversations of the boys stationed around the room. Neil turned his head with the rest to see Cameron, the last member of the study group, who hadn't moved with the rest of them past the doorway he was currently leaning against.

"Sorry to interrupt," he announced, "but need I remind you all that we came in this room with a purpose, gentlemen?"

"Oh! Right!" Pitts exclaimed, slapping the flat of his palm against his forehead.

"And what was that purpose, Cameron?" Neil called out towards the doorway. It was Pitts who answered him, though.

"Dr. Hager told us to tell you to meet him downstairs in ten minutes."

Neil felt his smile grow just that little bit tauter, like a bowstring pulled almost to the point of snapping. "And how long has it been since then?"

Everyone looked over to Meeks, who had to push the bridge of his glasses back up onto his face as he stared down at his wristwatch. He then glanced guiltily back upwards towards Neil.

“Eight minutes ago,” he answered. He then flicked his eyes down once again. “Nine minutes, now.”

Neil groaned, shrugging on his blazer as fast as possible while he raced towards the door. He bid the group a hasty goodbye as he hurried into the hallway, Charlie’s voice chasing after him as he did.

“Make sure to say hi to Chet for Knox, won’t you?”

Neil found himself grinning as he descended the stairs two, three, four at a time—genuinely grinning, an ear-to-ear smile he couldn’t seem to shake from his face. It was a small condolence. Even if the evening was nothing to look forward to, at least he’d be able to come back to this afterwards. He held onto that thought like a prayer as he quickened his steps down the Welton halls, pushing himself out of the doors and into the brisk, waiting air outside.

Neil smoothed his blazer as he marched up the path, shoes tapping on the pavement. He was vaguely aware of Dr. Hager shadowing him as he did, but chose to keep his focus solely on schooling his features and remembering the script—he was here to discuss his future with Mr. Danburry over dinner, and after that he could shuck this whole night from his memory as he pleased. He rapped politely on the door; three sharp, even knocks, assertive but not insistent.

Neil took the time between his knocking and the swinging open of the

door to collect himself, plastering on the practised smile that he wore around every adult his father considered of moderate import. It should've been tiring, keeping it up for however long he'd need to, but Neil was well used to it by now.

The door opened with little fanfare, nothing but the click of hinges and a small breath of warmth coming from the mouth of the house. Neil looked up with his winning smile, ready to greet his gracious host, and—

And about almost dropped his face in shock.

But Neil was nothing if not the picture of politeness—and so, without betraying his momentary hesitation, he pushed his hand out and forced a greeting out from his lips. *God,* he thought, *it really is going to be a long night.*

"Chet Danburry, isn't it?"

Chapter End Notes

I have some of the chapters rotting in my notes app. not finished tho..... expect updates whenever god wills it.

And Merry Christmas again as well !!!!!!!!!!

For A Moment, I Heard The Rustle In Leaves

Chapter Summary

> Neil meets the Danburry's daughter, her friend, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Danburry themselves. Eventually.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In Neil's defence.

He had never paid any proper attention to the Danburry boy during Chet's brief time attending Welton. Sure, he had heard his fair share from Knox over the years following the 'Welton ghosts' incident—enough that Neil would shoot Chet a withering glare or two whenever he passed the older boy in the hallway. But Neil had never actually memorised many of his features, and once Chet had dropped out to attend the nearby Ridgeway High School, what little remained in Neil's brain was slowly… written over. Like a chalkboard being erased to make room for more writings, the space in Neil's brain taken up by Chet's facial features found far better use being filled instead with mathematical equations, Latin conjugations, and proper essay form. The mental portrait of one boy in the class above simply wasn't that important.

Besides, all of that had been a good couple years ago now. Now, all Neil knew about Chet came from the grapevine snaking from the Danburry's to Knox's parents, tangling down to Knox, and then twisting out to the rest of the study group. Knox would helpfully relay any and all information he overheard to his friends in minutes rants over breakfast, or during class, or late at night in the common room; from these rants, Neil had taken away two points.

One; that Knox could very well hold a grudge if he wanted to. Neil mentally noted to avoid anything that would land him on the boy's bad side—not that he wanted to take Charlie's job away from him, anyway.

Two, and perhaps most relevant to the situation at hand; according to Knox's reports, Chet was revoltingly "popular with all the girls at school," a factoid which all the listening boys had appropriately gagged at. Still, it had stuck in Neil's psyche, and so it had become his most recent image of the Danburry boy—appearing first and foremost in his mind whenever Chet was discussed amongst the group.

A prickish guy, with looks good enough to barf at.

So—

Could Neil *really* be blamed?

That when the door swung open to reveal what Neil could only describe as the prettiest boy he'd ever laid his eyes on, a boy who looked to be around about his age, standing in and answering the door of the *Danburry* household where the *Danburry's* lived to Neil, who was here to visit the *Danburry's*—that Neil had gotten just a tad confused?

Maybe the hair should've given it away, sandy-blonde and brushed down at the front. Or the eyes, which were a soft powder blue and had widened with surprise when Neil extended his hand. Or maybe the boy's whole demeanour, really, with how he shrank back from the door and stared down at his feet and muttered something under his breath that Neil couldn't quite make out.

What actually gave it away, however, was the appearance of a girl with dark chestnut hair, poking her head out of the adjoining hallway.

"Todd?" she called out. "Who's at the door?" She peered over his

shoulder, locking eyes with Neil. He shot her a polite smile as she took in his uniform, and saw the flash of recognition pass over her. “Oh!” She walked up to the door, resting her hand on the boy’s—*Todd’s*, Neil corrected himself—shoulder.

Neil felt something prickle in his stomach. It was probably hunger, he reasoned—he’d skipped out on lunch in favour of catching up with the study he’d be missing out on tonight, and therefore hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

“You, uh, must be Neil,” the girl said, studying him.

Neil couldn’t help but glance between her and Todd. Todd hadn’t moved his gaze any higher than his own shoes, looking as if he’d been turned to stone—but he hadn’t shoved off the girl’s hand on his shoulder, nor the one clinging onto his upper arm.

“I’m Ginny,” she continued. “I’m afraid my parents aren’t in right now… but you’re welcome to come in, if you want.”

Neil shook himself back to his manners. Awkwardly retracting back his hand, he grinned at Ginny. “Lovely to meet you Ginny, and… sorry, Todd was it?” Todd gave a small, firm nod, not taking his attention away from the floor for a second. Neil caught Ginny staring behind him and remembered that there was still a Welton staff member witnessing all of this. He gestured behind him. “This is Dr. Hager, he’s just dropping me off. And picking me back up, eventually.”

Ginny gave the man a shy wave. “Right, yes,” she said. “My mother told me… nine o’clock, right?” Dr. Hager nodded and, seeing Neil was now being let into the house, excused himself to trundle back to the car. Ginny joined Neil in waving him off before he disappeared from sight behind the Danburry’s’ manicured hedges. She then pulled the

statue that once was Todd aside so that Neil could enter.

"So," she called, leading Neil through the hallway and into the doorway she'd popped out from. Which, turns out, led into the living room. "My parents weren't expecting you until a little later, so they're still out… sorry."

"No worries," Neil replied, trying to ease her obvious nervousness with a smile. "My fault for arriving early, I suppose." It actually wasn't his fault—as it hadn't been *his* idea—but Ginny needn't know that.

"Yes. Well." Ginny's cheek flushed as she pointed aimlessly around the room, eventually landing on directing Neil towards the two couches facing towards each other. "Feel free to find a place to sit while you wait. I'm going to go… put the kettle on."

With that, she fled from the room, leaving Neil not a little lost on what he was doing. Sitting, apparently, as he plopped himself down on the couch, though he still couldn't help but feel restless. And irritated, as well. Of course, it had been his father's bright idea for him to arrive an hour early, so as to give him more time for discussion with Mr. Danburry—and, well, look how that had worked out. The one Danburry his father had wanted Neil to charm was out, and so Neil was instead consigned to waiting limply in the living room for his return. Not to mention he felt as if he was intruding on… *something* between Ginny and Todd. At the thought, his stomach prickled again —on top of everything else, his stomach was acting up. Incredible.

He was broken away from his thoughts by soft footsteps creeping into the room. Suspecting that they were Ginny returning from the kitchen, Neil stood up and turned around, eager to do anything except sit around—and was pleasantly surprised when he saw Todd slipping in, jumping under Neil's gaze like he'd been caught stealing. Neil noted that the boy was hugging a notebook to his chest, gripping its pages so hard that his knuckles were turning white. It was silly, but Neil felt as if he was facing down a beautiful, frightened deer; where any sudden

movement of his was sure to send the majestic creature dashing back off into the woods. He held up his hands, giving Todd his friendliest look.

“Hey! Todd, right?” Neil began.

Like before, Todd didn’t respond, instead just nodding his head.

“Sorry about the confusion earlier,” Neil continued, slowly edging his way around the couch.

It really was like approaching an easily startled animal. Neil even swore he could see Todd’s eyes flit between the two doorways he was standing between, the hallway to his right and the kitchen to his left. Neil didn’t give him the chance, closing the distance between them in two long strides, coming face to face with the quiet boy.

“How about we do this properly, this time?” Neil tried. He extended his hand out once again. “My name’s Neil Perry. And you are…?”

To Neil’s (again, pleasant) surprise, Todd took his hand. “T-Todd. Todd A-Anderson. But y-you uh, you already knew that f-first part.”

Something squirmed in the back of Neil’s brain as he grinned and shook Todd’s hand. Quite literally, he shook it—Todd’s hand was loose in his, leaving Neil to do all the work. “A pleasure to meet you, Todd Anderson. Sorry about confusing you for Chet earlier.”

Todd just made a small noise, which Neil took as his response. The handshake broke off and Todd resumed clutching his notebook, leaving Neil to awkwardly lean back on the arm of the couch. Todd

was eying the floor again, chin digging into his chest, and Neil followed his gaze down to see that there were several open books scattered on the floor around their feet.

“Sorry, did I interrupt something by coming early?”

“P-Pardon?”

Neil motioned towards the open books, laid out on the rug.

“Oh. Oh… s-sorry, I’ll get th-them….” Todd stammered, before crouching down so that he could begin gathering up the books.

“I didn’t mean…” Neil started, but Todd continued cleaning up what looked to be a study session—Neil could easily recognise the air of dust and boredom pouring out of the pages, proving them beyond the shadow of a doubt to be *textbooks*. He pushed himself off of the couch and squatted next to Todd, lightly tapping him on the back.

“Hey,” Neil said softly. “I didn’t mean pack them up.” Todd stared at Neil, confusion playing across his face. “I mean, you can if you want to,” Neil added, “but you’ll lose the pages, won’t you?”

“Uh. Y-Yeah, s-sorry.” Todd dropped the books he’d already picked up back onto the rug, standing up briskly. Neil stood with him.

“No apology necessary. What were you guys studying, if I may ask?”

“J-Just some stuff for… just f-for biology…” Todd stammered.

Neil chuckled, taking in the array of books splayed out like an open palm across the floor. “Huh. Year’s barely kicked off, and looks like you’ve already got plenty to study. Maybe Welton isn’t so different from other schools, after all.”

Todd perked up slightly. “Y-You go t-to Welton?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Neil gestured towards his uniform with a superficial sense of showmanship. “I’m not just wearing this because of my keen taste in fashion, you know.”

At that, Todd smiled. It was barely visible, just the tiniest quirk of the edges of his lips, but he *smiled*. After seeing how Todd had acted mere moments before, Neil felt as if it were the greatest achievements he’d ever made—it certainly made him prouder than any of the badges clinking on the breast of his blazer, or the trophies clogging up his closet back at home, or the certificates his father only ever hung on the wall when guests were over.

“Where do you and Ginny go to school?” Neil asked.

“W-We both go to Ridgeway. We also b-both moved there last year.”

“Really?” Neil hummed. “Where did you both move from?”

“I-I was originally at B-Balincrest, a-and Ginny went to H-Henley,” Todd explained. “You’d know Henley, r-right?”

“Of course,” Neil answered. “It’s our sister school— May I ask why

you both had to move schools?"

"I-It's, uh…" Todd trailed off. "I-It's personal, for me, at l-least, so…"

Neil shrugged, trying his best to convey to Todd that it was no huge deal. He wasn't about to prod and pry into Todd's life, not if the boy didn't want him to. Todd swallowed.

"Y-Y'know, m-my b-b-brother went to Welton."

"Really?" Neil was about to comment something—either that Todd was fortunate that he didn't follow in his brother's footsteps, subjected to the worst of Hell-ton; or that it was a shame, because Neil could imagine Todd fitting in well with his friends—but something else clicked in his head. That *something* that had squirmed in Neil's skull, when Todd had first introduced himself. "Say, your brother… your brother wouldn't be Jeffrey Anderson, would he?"

Neil knew he'd hit the nail on the head, but for all the wrong reasons. Just like that, any semblance of a smile gracing Todd's lips vanished, and, to Neil's dismay, the boy shrank right back in on himself. Neil wasn't sure what he'd done wrong; all he knew was that he wished he could undo it. It was like watching a flower unfurl its petals into the dewy morning air, only to bristle and snap shut soon after. Neil was about to apologise (for what, he still didn't know) when Ginny entered the room, holding a tray decked with three steaming mugs.

"I, uh, realised that I never actually asked you if you wanted tea…" she said, offering out the tray towards Neil. "But it's here if you'd like."

Neil turned to her, unsure if he was irritated by or grateful for her interruption. He plucked a mug off of the tray. "I'd love some, thank

you."

Ginny set down the try on a nearby table, before sweeping up the remaining two mugs—one she kept for herself, the other she offered out to Todd. Neil caught the incidental brush of their fingers as Todd graciously accepted the tea and, completely coincidentally, felt that familiar sensation of 'hunger' coil in his stomach once again.

"I'll… I'll just wait on the couch. You two can get back to whatever you were doing," he said. He then returned to his seat, nursing the warm ceramic in his hands and trying to ignore as Todd and Ginny began speaking softly between themselves behind him.

Neil secretly hoped that they would leave. It was awkward to hover in the corner, feigning interest in the expansive collection of drab books filling the shelves beside the fireplace. (Seriously, why on earth did the Danburry's bother to house novels with such thrilling titles such as *Ornithological Practice through Observation*?) As ever, the universe conspired against him, and the two settled back onto the rug to continue with their studying. They laid down, spreading out their books as they had been when Neil had first walked in—Ginny was leafing through the texts, while Todd scribbled away in his notebook. Watching the boy fervently scratch his pencil to the paper reminded Neil of the secretaries he'd seen in films—the ones tasked with taking minutes for board meetings, who were always terribly pretty, and who would fall in love with the gruff businessman protagonist in the end.

Neil tore his eyes away, raising the mug in his hands to his lips. Todd and Ginny talked in low voices, scarcely audible over the crackle of the fireplace, words barely reaching across the half of the living room which separated Neil from them. Not that he was trying to eavesdrop—no, Neil was perfectly content, sipping at his tea and staring at the wood grain of the coffee table until the pattern scored itself into his retinae. He'd occasionally throw glances over his shoulder at the couple, lying beside each other on the floor, but it was only ever in passing curiosity. He wasn't sure of what sort of magic Ginny was working, but she managed to have Todd smiling and blushing all throughout the two's studying—Neil even heard the boy laugh quietly

under his breath a couple times, a sound he though similar to the whisper of wind tracing over freshly settled snow.

Neil laid back into the cushion, wondering if anything he could've said would've made Todd hold his smile, could've made him laugh. If such words even existed, and Neil had known them, he would've recited them in a heartbeat. And he'd thought that getting Todd to smile was his greatest achievement—if he could get the boy to laugh? He would happily shed his badges, bin his trophies, burn his certificates, because none of them would mean anything, not to Neil, not anymore.

He sighed into his mug. Where were these thoughts coming from? The books on the shelf had lost what little interest they held, his head was aching from glaring at the coffee table, and now his mind was running itself senseless. If the clock hanging above the mantelpiece was correct, not even twenty minutes had passed since his arrival. Twenty minutes, and he'd already nearly drained his tea down to a thimbleful or so, swilling sadly around the bottom of the mug. He couldn't help it; whenever he peered over his shoulder and glimpsed Todd grinning down at Ginny, or Ginny resting her head in the crook of Todd's neck, or Ginny gliding her hands carefully over the wool of Todd's sweater as she patted him gently on the back, rubbing circles between his shoulder blades as quiet laughter floated between them—Neil would feel the now-dreaded hunger eat away at his insides, prickling along the walls of his stomach. It felt as if there was a rose bush twisting within Neil's abdomen, scraping its thorns past his lungs and pressing into his throat. Neil wouldn't be surprised if he began coughing up red petals.

And if he couldn't deal with this hunger—and that *was* what it was, hunger and nothing else—then the best Neil could do to distract himself from it was to drink from his tea.

Another soft peal of laughter sank its teeth into his ears. He drained the last of his drink and hoped the other Danburry's would be home soon.

It felt like an eternity had passed before a car rolled into the driveway outside, and an overfriendly Mr. and Mrs. Danburry made their way inside. Neil rose to greet them and they greeted Neil in turn, smiles and introductions and firm handshakes exchanged. Todd and Ginny stood, gathering up their books (not without bookmarking their place in each, Neil noticed) and excused themselves to Ginny's room. Mrs. Danburry disappeared into the kitchen, beginning dinner preparations, as Mr. Danburry settled into the couch opposite Neil.

"I'm afraid my son Chet won't be joining us tonight," the man explained as he settled close to the mantel. "He's off with that girlfriend of his—you know how you boys are." He said the last sentence with a chuckle.

Neil didn't, but he nodded and chuckled along anyway. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Ginny leading Todd up the stairs by the hand, and listened to the pitter-patter of their footsteps fade down like the end of a song. He wished, not for the first time, that he had some tea remaining in his mug.

Mr. Danburry (or *Dr*. Danburry, as Neil's father would insist he refer to him as) made pleasant conversation enough. He was definitely enthusiastic, Neil granted him that. Mr. Danburry displayed more emotion recounting the story of meeting Knox's father than Neil's father managed to in over a year. It was impressive—and not a little disconcerting—to see an adult, nay, a *figure* so revered by his father acting with such…. joviality. Neil was almost relieved to move onto talk of Mr. Danburry's academic pathway, his time studying medicine, his work as a professional. It was procedural, clinical, yes, but it was the kind of conversation Neil was used to having with adults, stuffed full of polite smiles and leading questions. It was what he was most familiar with; steering the discussion towards certain topics, memorising notes to fill his father in on later, building connections that would no doubt give him that honed edge when it came to the future he had planned for him. Neil was thoroughly exhausted by the end of it.

It certainly hadn't helped that he'd been distracted the whole time. He'd kept glancing over towards the empty section of the floor where Todd had been studying with Ginny that afternoon. The ghosts of their shapes clung onto the folds of the rug, and their empty mugs still stood sentry atop a table besides the space. And under that table, just barely peeking out from between the wooden legs, was a notebook—one that bared a striking resemblance to the one Neil had seen Todd clutching to his chest. And once Neil had noticed that, he couldn't help but wander his eyes over to it whenever he could, if only to check that it was still there. He expected Todd to come back downstairs to collect it at any moment, but (to Neil's disappointment) the boy made no further appearances.

"So," Mr. Danburry began, catching Neil off guard. "How are you enjoying Welton, Neil?".

Neil drew his attention away from the hallway, back towards the opposite facing couch. "Well," Neil replied, "I'm ahead in both Latin and chemistry…"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Danburry interrupted, waving his hand. "But how are you *enjoying* it?"

"I'm… sorry?" Neil couldn't quite place what the man was on about.

"I mean, are you involved in any clubs you're enjoying? What are your teachers like? Don't forget, I was once a student there as well." He leaned in a little closer, as Neil struggled to understand the situation. "Has the food improved at all?"

"I couldn't imagine it's ever been worse," Neil responded, before realising what he'd said. He clamped a hand over his mouth, but Mr.

Danburry simply laughed. It was an alien noise—but not unpleasant.

It was at that moment that Mrs. Danburry reemerged from the kitchen, announcing to the pair that dinner was ready. Mr. Danburry winked at Neil before standing up and walking through to the dining room, leaving Neil and his complete confusion on the couch cushions. Through the fog he heard Mrs. Danburry call Todd and Ginny down from the foot of the stairs, soon after followed by a pair of footsteps racing down. The footsteps stopped in the hallway, however, and began speaking with Mrs. Danburry rather than entering into the living room. Curious, Neil peeked through the doorway.

The first thing he noticed was that Todd had pulled on a coat over his sweater, in addition to throwing a satchel bag over his shoulder. He stood between Ginny and her mother by the front door as the other two whispered between each other, sharp enough that Neil could hear them from his vantage point.

“He doesn’t need to leave! Mom, tell him he doesn’t need to leave!”

Neil’s heart skipped a beat. Todd was leaving?

“Now, now, dear. It’s his and his parent’s decision. If they want him back by a certain time…”

“They don’t care,” Ginny scoffed. “He just doesn’t want to intrude in on dinner with a guest…”

Oh. Even worse. Todd was leaving because of *Neil*.

Before he’d processed what he was doing, Neil had stood up from the

couch and marched over to the group. Ginny and Mrs. Danburry were both facing away from the living room, and busy arguing amidst themselves at that—Todd was neither, and his eyes went wide as he saw Neil approaching. Neil tried giving him his most encouraging smile, but that seemed to only make the boy start and stare downwards. *Incredible.*

"I don't mean to cut in," Neil cut in, "but I couldn't help but overhear — Is Todd not joining us for dinner?"

Ginny and Mrs. Danburry both whipped their heads around to Neil at his intrusion and, after registering what he'd said, turned back to Todd —all in perfect unison, like a dance. Neil hadn't fully seen the resemblance before, but now it seemed impossible for them to be anything but mother and daughter. Neil watched with a wince as Todd was confronted with their joint expectant stares.

"I-I-I j-just… d-didn't w-w-want to i-intrude…" he mumbled into the collar of his coat.

"Oh, you needn't worry," Neil insisted, "I would be *delighted* if you stayed for dinner. Really." He watched Todd consider it, hoping that it hadn't sounded too forced. Neil couldn't imagine letting the boy slip away into the night, never to be seen again—even if that was what would happen at the end of the evening, anyway.

"W-Well… i-if it r-really is n-no trouble," Todd finally relented.

"Trouble?" Mrs. Danburry exclaimed, patting Todd on the back. "The table's already set for five, dear. It would be more trouble putting all the cutlery back into the drawers."

"Come on, Todd," Ginny added, tugging at his arms. "Take that coat

off and come to the table.” She continued to pull at the sleeve, and Todd eventually unfroze and shrugged off his coat.

Neil spun on his heel, walking to the dining room with Mrs. Danburry in tow, leaving the couple to fuss in the hallway. He sat down at the table, grateful that soon he’d finally have some food to settle his stomach.

And as Todd walked in with Ginny, back in his sweater, Neil couldn’t help but smile to himself. The two took their seats, and dinner began.

Chapter End Notes

If Todd seems more whipped than usual..... thats just what public school does to a guy

chapter title is again from Glory of the Snow but the next chapter title will not be

It's When You're Close Enough To Touch

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of an *almost* successful Danburry dinner gives Neil much to reflect on. And his friends much to misinterpret. Fun.

Chapter Notes

Was originally two chapters but if I do that I'm gonna run out of useable lyrics real fast

Speaking of which chapter title is from 'Second Nature'

Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil thought the clock hanging above the Danburry's' mantelpiece was lovely, really; gilded hands, golden frame, roman numerals embossed onto its face.

His only issue with it was that it always seemed to be running astronomically slow. It was still only half past eight, despite the literal eternity that had passed since Neil had last checked it. He sighed and laid his head back on the couch—yes, he was back on the Danburry couch, and waiting atop it was driving him just as mad after dinner as it had before.

Dinner had been a relatively quiet affair, all things considered. Neil hadn't had anymore points to drill Mr. Danburry on, and yet the man persisted in striking up conversation with him anyhow. The oddest questions, too, such as what sports he played, and what Neil's friends were like—it was plain that Mr. Danburry was attempting to get to know Neil, but Neil wandered to what end it was for. Luckily, he didn't need to concern himself with that, as there was distraction enough around the table that Neil could easily deflect the talk away from him. Not that Neil was avoiding Mr. Danburry —he was just simply far too focused on eating to hold any lengthy discussions, that was all.

Too focused on eating, as well as too focused on Todd.

The boy had ended up sitting opposite him, incredibly, which had given Neil the opportunity to try and catch Todd's eye all throughout the meal. A venture soon proven futile, as Todd was always either staring down at his food or turned to Ginny, sat to his right, so that the two could whisper to each other. Neil had tried fruitlessly to engage Todd in conversation, but that had petered out as quick as flash paper—the boy would always stumble over his tongue in answering, face turning crimson, only for someone else to helpfully fill in Neil's request.

Neil asks how Todd finds Ridgeway, and Ginny informs him of the horrors they're faced with every single school day. Neil asks Todd what his plans are after graduating, and Mr. Danburry tells him that Todd has excellent grades in English, and that he really should pursue something in that field. Neil asks Todd to pass the potatoes. Mrs. Danburry reaches over the table to assist.

And of course, as soon as dinner had ended, Todd and Ginny had, once again, excused themselves upstairs. Once again, Ginny had led Todd up by the hand. Once again, Todd had simply vanished into thin air, not so much as a word to voice his goodbye.

Once again, Neil checked the clock above the mantelpiece. Two minutes had passed. Spectacular. He seriously hoped that Dr. Hager's clock was still turned ten minutes too fast (like how Charlie had set it last year), and that the car was already well on its way to the house to pick Neil up. As he sunk further into the couch, he loosened his tie, hoping it would make the room any more bearable, the clawing sensation in his throat any less prevalent—

A bout of giggling echoed in through the hallway. Neil knew very well who it belonged to already, but he still craned his neck to see all the same. There they were—Todd wrapped back in his coat, Ginny bidding him sweet farewells. Neil pushed himself to his feet.

“Leaving for real this time?” Neil jested, stepping into the hallway and leaning against the doorframe.

“Yes,” Ginny answered, passing Todd his satchel. Neil ground his teeth together—why did no one in this family let the boy speak for himself?

“Well.” Neil turned to watch as Todd slung the bag strap over his shoulder. “It was wonderful meeting you, Todd, really.” He knew he’d be pushing his luck trying for another handshake, and so instead settled on simply smiling at him.

Todd muttered something, nodded, then turned back to Ginny.

“See you, Todd,” she chirped. Then she stepped up on her toes and gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek.

Neil murmured a final, pleasant goodbye and politely took his leave, wandering back into the living room—where he then proceeded to hunch over a table and fight the sudden, inordinate urge to throw up the entire contents of his stomach. Something from dinner must not have been sitting right; that was the only plausible explanation Neil could come up with. His head spun unpleasantly, and he tried taking in his surroundings to distract himself from the sudden bout of nausea. He was currently supporting himself on the table besides where Todd and Ginny had studied previously, staring down at the ground where the two had lain, willing himself not to be sick all over the lovely Persian they’d laid their books out on.

And that’s when he noticed it.

The corner of the notebook he’d spied earlier, peeking out from under the table.

Todd's notebook.

Neil picked it up reverently. He stared at it in awe, imagining what could be held inside such that it required Todd to hug it to his chest so tightly. Was it a sketchbook? A journal? A planner? Surely nothing overly important, or else Todd wouldn't have forgotten it—most likely it was just study notes for biology, or English, or history, or any of the other subjects that were probably just as terminally boring when taught at Ridgeway as when they were taught at Welton.

And if it was nothing but unimportant study notes, surely, it wouldn't do anyone any harm if Neil were to flip through—just to take his mind off of his nausea.

And. Well.

It was a piece of Todd he was holding.

Things would be fine, right? It was only a peek.

Neil spied a doggy-eared page and, with a single flick of his deft fingers—

Welton's front door rattled softly behind him, swinging closed on its hinges. He marched through the empty, dust-ridden hallways, dragging his feet along the ground.

The very last dregs of late-night conversations were bleeding through the common room door, just audible as Neil stood before it. He took a moment to brace himself before slowly twisting the knob and

entering, blazer thrown over his shoulder and melancholy colouring his face. The world blurred around him, everything blending into nothing but colours and bright spots as Neil unfocused his eyes. He could almost see them, the words sprawling across the page—like streetlights, stark against the darkling sky—when Charlie reeled him back into reality.

"Hey Neil!" he called. "How was dinner?"

Neil barely heard him, still staring into the fuzzy image before him. "Pardon?"

"How was dinner?" Charlie repeated. "As terrible as you'd thought it would be?"

Neil considered the question. *Words, streetlights, shoes echoing down the street, away from him*. The constant ache, digging itself into a pit in his chest. He winced.

"Worse," he answered.

Then he kicked himself off of the door, pulling up a seat at the table where Charlie and Knox were both being tutored in trigonometry by Cameron—ineffectually, by the looks of it, not improved by the two pupils immediately packing away their workbooks to clear space for Neil. Meeks and Pitts were in the corner, tinkering with their hi-fi system, but peeled themselves away from it to join the rest of the study group.

"What was wrong with it?" Charlie asked, a single eyebrow raised as he considered Neil.

“Were the Danburry’s a hassle?” suggested Meeks.

Neil shook his head. “No. They were lovely.” A touch strange, Neil thought, with how familial they were with one another—but ultimately, they were pleasant company.

“Was the food bad, then?” inquired Pitts.

Neil thought back to the dinner. He hadn’t been terribly focused on the meal itself, but from what he could remember the ham was well-salted and the potatoes dripping with butter. And whatever had unsettled his stomach earlier hadn’t stayed there, the sensation since worming itself upwards into his heart. He shook his head again.

“Chet was accosting you, then,” supposed Knox. “I’ll bet it was that!”

Neil almost laughed. “No, Knox, your *archnemesis* didn’t even bother to show up.”

All the boys looked between each other, equal parts confusion, concern, and curiosity plastered on their faces. Even Cameron, who had his nose stuck into his trigonometry textbook, flitted his gaze up to Neil with an expression one might *generously* call worry. Neil wished he could fill them in on how he was feeling, explain away all of the oddness beating about his mind like tree boughs in a storm. But how could he possibly achieve that, when he himself didn’t properly understand it?

Really—

—it was madness. A knot of tightly wound writing Neil had to unpick

slowly if he ever wished to decipher its meaning.

Stanzas woven from the thin threads of flowing lines unspooled themselves down the page beneath Neil's gaze. Words were scribbled over, their replacements pencilled in the margin beside. Entire lines were crossed through, rewritten just beneath in the same, delicate hand as the rest. In some places paragraphs were circled in grey lead and directed elsewhere by arrows, the lyrical tapestries rearranging themselves like a puzzle on the paper. Neil flipped through the rest of the pages, finding lines upon lines of poetry.

Poetry.

Neil slammed the notebook shut.

He felt terrible.

He felt exhilarated.

The word buzzed like magic in his mind—poetry, poetry, poetry. Todd wrote poetry.

And he wrote it well.

The tips of his fingertips itched from where they'd touched the paper, his palms slick against the careworn cover as he bounced from the ball of his left foot to that of his right. Something giddying had taken over him. He hurried into the hallway, startling Ginny as he practically leapt out in front of her, notebook clasped in hand and eyes wild.

“Neil?”

He breathed. He had to appear nonchalant, calm, disinterested. As if he had no idea just how precious the item he held was, no idea what it meant to Todd, no idea how Todd would react if Neil told him he—

“Neil!”

He snapped out of it. Neil was once again in the common room of Welton, five other boys gathered around him, all of which now had their eyes firmly trained on him.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I must’ve… anyway, what was it?”

Charlie thumbed towards the boy beside him at table. “Knoxious asked you something.”

Knox sputtered, glaring at Charlie. Charlie elbowed him in the shoulder, nodding his head towards Neil. Eventually, Knox indignantly relented.

“*I* was just wondering…” he said, not taking his eyes off of the unbothered Charlie, “…if the Danburry’s were nice, and the food was fine, and Chet wasn’t even *there*— Why’d you have such a bad time?”

Neil looked between them—his friends—and sighed through his teeth; they deserved at least an attempt at an explanation, didn’t they? Staring down at the floor, he tried to form the proper words.

“I… I may have met someone else at the Danburry’s house.”

“I knew it!” Charlie exclaimed. “That Danburry girl was there, wasn’t she?” He clicked his fingers. “What was her name? Jenny, or something…”

“Ginny,” Neil corrected. He realised his mistake too late, as Charlie laid back in his chair and smirked.

“So,” Charlie continued, “what’s this *Ginny* like?”

“Shut it, Dalton.”

“Not until you tell us, Perry.”

“She’s…” Neil recalled the snippets of conversation he’d shared with her over dinner. For the most part, she’d kept to herself—herself and Todd, of course. Neil remembered her lying beside and laughing with Todd in the living room, books positioned around the pair. “She’s smart. Really smart.”

“What else is she like?” Knox asked, expectantly.

Neil remembered her carefully guiding Todd through the house. Her fingers feathering over Todd’s when she’d passed him his tea. Her tracing the back of Todd’s sweater as he studied with her.

“She’s gentle. Quiet, but in a sweet way.”

“And?” Pitts urged.

“She’s…” Todd staring at her with the softness of snow in his eyes. Todd smiling at her as they whispered between each other at the table. Todd’s cheeks dusted pink when she kissed him by the door. “… beautiful,” Neil finished.

A moment passed where all that could be heard was the conversations leaking out into the hallway, the scuffle of shoes across the carpet outside, the jostle of bags and books as the other boys of Welton picked their way back to their dorms as curfew approached.

“Well,” Charlie announced. “I think we can all see Neil’s problem now.”

Neil listed his head to the side, puzzled. “You can?”

“I mean, it’s obvious.” He spun his body so that he could stare Neil in the face. “You, Neil Perry,” he declared, “have fallen in love with Ginny Danburry.”

Another several beats of silence. Neil stared at Charlie, trying to read the other boy’s face for any sign of this being another one of his antics. A sparkle in the eye, a short exhale of breath, a set in the jaw from holding his smile back—to his horror, he couldn’t locate a single giveaway.

He laughed, anyway. “What?” He looked around. None of the other boys were laughing. All of them were either grinning suspiciously at him or pretending not to be interested (Cameron). Neil was floored. “Oh, come now… you can’t seriously think that.”

“I mean,” Meeks piped up, “you did call her beautiful.”

“Quite romantically, too,” Knox argued.

Neil knitted his brow, squirming in his seat. It didn’t make sense—couldn’t make sense. *Could it?* “Guys. I’m not…” he scrambled for something, anything. “It… it wouldn’t even matter if I did.”

Charlie rested his elbows on the table, weaving his fingers together. “And why wouldn’t it matter?”

“Because…” Neil sighed. “Because I’m pretty sure she’s already dating someone, that’s why.” He hadn’t even considered it, not really. But once the words were out of his mouth, it all clicked. *Of course*.

Todd and Ginny were dating. How hadn’t Neil realised it sooner? Well, in truth, he *had* realised it. It had merely happened subconsciously, his mind picking up the clues and piecing them together in the background. Only now, when he’d spoken it aloud, had his consciousness caught up. *Todd and Ginny were dating*. Why did that thought make his blood freeze in his veins?

Charlie leant forward. “So who’s the guy?”

Neil took a second to catch his breath as he sank into his seat. He shut his eyelids. *Powder blue eyes. Sandy-blonde hair. The back of a coat, flapping as its wearer shuffled away into the night*.

“Todd Anderson,” Neil near whispered, the name sending shivers

down his spine as it ghosted over his lips.

When he opened his eyes again, he was met with four blank looks.

“Right,” Charlie said. “And… who the *hell* is Todd Anderson?”

“God.” How could Neil possibly describe a boy he’d barely talked to? He thought of the words he’d read in Todd’s notebook, the ones he never should’ve seen. “He’s… brilliant. But shy. We didn’t talk much, and when we did I did most of the talking.” Neil smiled, picturing the half of a conversation they’d had in the Danburry’s’ living room. “He stuttered a lot.” *And he’s probably never going to speak to me again*, Neil added mentally, his smile growing tense.

“Sounds like a stiff,” Cameron commented from behind his homework.

“Hey!” Charlie turned on the boy. “Have you been listening this whole time?”

“…no.”

“Liar!”

“Liar or not, I mean, Cameron’s right,” Knox remarked. “If I’m being honest Neil, this guy doesn’t honestly sound like a threat.”

You wouldn’t think that if you’d looked him in the eyes, Neil thought. *If you’d seen his smile, or heard his laughter, or felt his breath against your face.* Neil couldn’t say any of that, though.

“You don’t get it,” he said instead. “She’s… perfect for him.”

“You mean he’s perfect for her,” Meeks corrected.

Neil waved his hand. “It’s the *same thing*. Listen, I couldn’t even get the boy to speak a word to me. He barely smiled at me. But with her… it was like she’d hung the moon and stars.”

The boys exchanged looks between them.

“P-Plus!” Neil added, feeling his face turn a little red. “He’s Jeffrey Anderson’s brother.”

That got their attention.

“Holy shit,” Charlie blurted out. “Jeffrey Anderson had a brother?”

“Yes,” Neil answered. “So he’s probably amazing at a million other things. So I haven’t got a chance, okay?”

“With Ginny?” Knox asked.

Neil swallowed, confused at the clarification. “Y-Yeah, with Ginny. So you can all just drop it.”

None of the boys said anything. The last of the other students had

since trickled out of the door, leaving the room as quiet as a graveyard. Charlie was clearly plotting in his head—Neil could recognise that expression of his anywhere—while Knox was giving Neil a strange but sympathetic look. Meeks and Pitts were sharing glances between each other, having an entire conversation in their own language—one which the other study group members were yet to crack. Like a well oiled mechanism, both patted Neil on the back and then returned to their hi-fi system to begin packing it up.

"Anything else happen?" Cameron eventually asked, his trigonometry textbook and feigned disinterest now both cast aside.

Neil gritted his teeth together.

"Neil?"

"Ginny! Hey!" He presented the notebook to her, barely able to contain his enthusiasm. Or his nervousness. "I… found this in the living room. It wouldn't be yours, would it?" Neil knew very well it wasn't hers, but he was nothing if not a terrific pretender.

"Oh!" Ginny covered her mouth with her hand. "That's Todd's!"

Neil smiled. "Oh, really?" he feigned, oh-so innocently.

"He'll be terrified to have lost that!" Ginny fussed. "If… if you want to leave it with me, I can return it to him at school…"

It was a generous offer. A safe offer. One that Neil really should accept—and normally would, if these were ordinary circumstances. But they weren't *ordinary circumstances. Neil had adrenaline clogging up his*

arteries, cutting off the circulation of common sense up into his brain, and one most fascinating boy was currently slipping through his fingers.

"I mean…" Neil said. "He can't have gone that far already, right?"

"I… don't think so," Ginny answered, hesitantly.

"Well," Neil replied, glint in his eye as he flung open the front door. "I'll just have to catch up and do something."

"Nothing," he said to Cameron. "Nothing else happened."

Knox leaned in. "Are you certain—"

"Yes, Knox, I'm certain!" Neil snapped. "Look, nothing's going to come out of this, alright? And I… I wouldn't care if anything did. There. End of story."

Knox held up his hands, and nodded.

Neil excused himself, bidding the boys goodnight as he stood up and stalked back to his room. His roommate was already asleep when Neil entered, somehow, despite the lamp left burning on his bedside table. Neil sighed and pulled open his wardrobe to pull out his pyjamas. As he did, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror.

His tie hung slightly loose in the seat of his collar, from where Neil had tugged at it after dinner. His Welton blazer was perfect, as always, useless badges winking in the lamplight. His hair, though. Neil felt a

bitter laugh build at the back of his throat.

At the back, one single tuft poked upwards in defiance. The very same one that he'd worked so tirelessly to flatten that very afternoon.

He swallowed the laugh and went to brush his teeth. He stared defiantly at the lick of hair poking out from his head as he swilled his brush around his mouth, his breath coming fast from his nostrils and his hands clawing at the side of the sink.

He was stupid.

He was foolish.

He—

He spotted Todd only a little down the road, a thin silhouette of black topped with a head of hair washed pale by the light of the streetlamps. Neil didn't think—before he knew it, he was running towards the figure, Todd turning just in time to catch Neil's face easing as he slowed his sprint. Everything else seemed to slow with it, as if time was coming to a stop with every lengthier and lengthier step he took towards the boy. When he was only a feet or two away, Neil found himself out of breath.

"Uh, hi, sorry," he said, pulling himself upright. He held out the notebook. "I believe this is yours?"

Todd turned white, frantically checking his coat as well as the satchel bag slung over his shoulder—to his open horror, both were utterly devoid of the item Neil had just offered out to him. With an uncharacteristic boldness, Todd snatched the book back and was pulling it flush against his chest

before Neil could process what was happening. Before even Todd *could process what was happening, it seemed, because the boy appeared just as surprised at his actions as Neil was. Todd looked terribly close to spilling over with apologies, so Neil quickly intervened.*

"Happy to have it back, I'm guessing?" Neil laughed, winking at the distraught looking boy before him.

"Uh… y-yes." Todd blinked up at Neil, his mouth opening and closing a few times before he shook his head. "Th-Thanks for returning it."

"Oh, it was no problem."

Todd loosened his death grip on the book very slightly, just enough so that his hands could pick idly at the edges of the pages. Neil thought maybe the conversation had ended, but eventually Todd spoke up once more.

"You d-didn't… r-r-read anything in it, d-did you?"

"No," Neil lied.

And that was where it should have ended. With Todd breathing his sigh of relief, Neil biting back all of the questions and compliments he wished to shower Todd with, and both parties leaving on terms such that if a reunion ever were to occur (something Neil was sure he could *somehow* arrange) it wouldn't be to the chagrin of either party.

However.

Neil was an idiot.

A guilty idiot, whose interest had been piqued.

The lie had hardly left his mouth before he chased it up with a confession. "Well, actually… I may have taken a small peek, sorry…" Neil looked up with perfect timing, able to catch the very moment Todd's expression turned stricken. "But I-I only saw a couple of lines!"

Todd inhaled sharply through his teeth, barely audible. He became frozen to the spot, his whole body rigid.

"I'm sorry," Neil whispered, stepping closer to the boy. "But Todd… what I saw was brilliant! Really!"

He realised, belatedly, that he'd perhaps stepped too *close to Todd. He was able to feel the other boy's warm breath steam out against his cheek in the brisk air as he leaned in closer—only so Todd could hear him better, naturally. Todd slowly began to retreat away, staring at the floor and worrying at his bottom lip with his teeth.*

"You're brilliant, Todd," Neil repeated, gentler than he had before. God, he wished he could stop, but words simply continued to spill out of his mouth. "I'd be honoured if you'd let me read some more. It's incredible."

"It's not," Todd said, backing away, still not having raised his eyes.

"Todd…" Neil called, his voice as soft and low as he could manage. "I—"

Todd finally looked up at that, and Neil immediately wished he hadn't. Tears were glistening in the boy's eyes, and the sight made Neil realise how thoroughly he'd botched this. He should've never peeked inside the book. Could it ever have been worth this?

"I'm sorry," Neil said. "I'll… get out of your hair." Then he turned and began speedwalking back towards the Danburry's, determined to inflict no further misery onto the poor boy behind him. His body betrayed him halfway past the hedges, however, and he wasn't able to help himself—he risked a glance over his shoulder. He just caught a thin, dark silhouette, with a head of sandy-blonde hair and a back hunched over itself, as it fled around a corner, its footsteps echoing down the empty street.

Neil cursed at himself. He spat toothpaste down the sink and cursed at himself, at his stupidity, at whatever had first possessed him. He should have never touched the damn notebook. He should have never opened it. But he had, he'd stuck his filthy hands into someone else's business—for what? To staunch his boredom for a moment? To satisfy his mad curiosity? To glean a glimpse, however small, into who this infuriatingly intriguing boy truly was?

He yanked the tap on and watched as the water swirled down the drain.

He wished that the whole night would swirl away with it.

"Neil."

"Charlie."

"*Neil.*"

"*Charlie*."

Neil gathered up his books and pens and strolled out of the door, leaving Charlie to trip over his own footsteps as he fought to catch up with him on his way to their next class—English. A class Neil found he was looking forward to, surprisingly. He'd thought he'd known what to except from a class spent studying old books, dusty plays, dull literature written by duller men—that being a slow death by boredom, most likely—but one Mr. Keating had successfully proven him wrong, to his great surprise. Neil found that he had no clue what to anticipate for any upcoming lesson, which was *exciting*; not that he could focus on that excitement when he was so preoccupied with ignoring Charlie's advice, a task easier said than completed.

"Come on, Neil, at least wait up for poor Knoxious," Charlie begged. "You know he was born with legs made of pudding—" a distant, insulted "Hey!" echoed down the hallway, from somewhere far behind the two boys, "—and he can't walk as fast as everyone else. It's unfair of you to abandon him."

"Then you wait for him," Neil drawled, speeding around a corner to the stairwell. He ascended the steps two at a time.

"Is this about what I said in chemistry?" Not to be outdone, Charlie ascended the steps *three* at a time, quickly matching Neil's pace. "You have to admit, I was correct."

"You were not!"

Charlie rolled his eyes. "What else would you call it? You were *moping*, Neil, and moping something fierce at that."

“I. Wasn’t. Moping!” Neil hissed. Quite loudly.

As the pair turned into another hallway, they came upon a group of three lowerclassmen who stared at Neil and Charlie with eyes as wide as saucers. Charlie sighed, sternly warned them to mind their own damn business, and then scattered them with a violent hand gesture. They scurried back down the way Neil and Charlie had come from, their feet pitter-pattering down the stairs. Another, slightly more startled “Hey!” resounded from the same direction as before, as a faraway Knox was nearly trampled.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Neil warned.

“They have no clue who either of us are, Perry, we’ll be fine,” Charlie said. “And yes, it was one-hundred-percent moping.”

Neil clenched his jaw as he continued tramping down the hallway. “For the last time, I’m not—”

“In love with Ginny Danburry? I’ll believe it when I see it,” Charlie replied smartly. “Just think about what I said, alright?”

“What, about me moping?”

“No,” Charlie sighed, “What I said before, remember?”

Neil slowed his pace slightly as he thought back on the past few days. “The… spaghetti at dinner… could’ve used more meatballs?”

“Not that one. Come on, *think*.” Charlie pinched his brow as he marched alongside Neil, muttering under his breath, “I was correct about that too, though. We were *robbed*.”

Neil tilted his head. “You think that… we should stay at Welton over the winter break and steal wine from the kitchen for Christmas?”

“I mean yes, I do think we should do that, but—” Charlie trailed off, realisation setting in on his face. “Oh. *Oh*. I know what you’re doing.”

At that moment, the door besides them opened with a heavy, wooden creak. Out stepped Mr. Nolan himself, and Neil immediately straightened up. He spied Charlie doing the same in his periphery.

“Boys,” Mr. Nolan uttered. “On your way to class?”

Neil and Charlie both nodded.

The headmaster considered them both, eyeing Charlie with particular wariness, before eventually waving them on. “Best hurry on then.”

Charlie waited until they were safely out of earshot before he continued lecturing Neil. “You’re playing dumb,” he accused, jabbing his finger in the air.

“I’m doing nothing of the sort,” Neil lied, hitting Charlie’s finger away.

Charlie simpered. “Well then, I’ll just remind you. When you imagine Todd, with Ginny, and they’re—"

“Oh, look, we’re here.” With that, Neil yanked open the door, letting the noises within spill out and wash over the end of Charlie’s sentence. He spun on his heel and, before Charlie could get another word out, shoved the boy into the classroom.

From down the corridor there came a third, distant “Hey!”, though this one with a much deeper, authoritative timbre. Shortly afterward, Knox appeared around the corner, face red, nodding as Neil held the door open for him.

“Thanks Neil,” he said, fussing with his books as he hurried into class. “I think I ran past Nolan back there, so we might want to—”

“Right.” Neil bundled them both into the classroom, pulling the door shut behind them as swiftly and subtly as he could manage. He then settled into his seat—for once grateful that Charlie was separated from him, all the way up the back—and deposited his books and such onto his desk, ready for the lesson.

So maybe Neil had acted a touch… despondent in the lab. Dejected. Disconsolate. *Morose*, even. And maybe, just maybe, this behaviour was beginning to become a less and less irregular pattern in his routine. But even then, Charlie was being ridiculous. Hell, the whole newly reconvened Dead Poets Society was being ridiculous; dedicating far too much of their very first meeting to discussing Neil’s recent developments, as well as hatching harebrained schemes to help Neil ‘woo’ Ginny Danburry. Whether it was in common room or cave, all of his friends seemed convinced it was their duty to help Neil win her over.

And while that was… *ludicrous*, Neil had to admit—there was

definitely *something* wrong with him. He couldn't help it; no matter how much he wracked his brain, no matter how hard he threw himself into classwork, no matter how many hours he spent staring at his notes—he seemed incapable of erasing that night at the Danburry's from his mind.

And *him*.

He couldn't erase *him* from his mind.

An obstacle. A romantic rival. Some jerk that the good girls always go for over proper gentlemen. That's how Neil's friends often referred to Todd (the lattermost description being Pitt's invention. Worryingly). And why shouldn't that be accurate? Neil recalled the so-called stomach-aches he'd endured while at the Danburry's—he knew what they really were, now, thanks to Knox.

"*Jealousy*," the boy had spouted, when they'd all been gathered around the fire in the old Indian cave.

"*What*?" Neil had responded. He'd just finished recounting the night in full detail—or as full a detail as he could be pressured into telling.

"*It… sounds like jealousy to me,*" Knox had reasoned, shrugging slightly, casting his eyes past the flames to where Charlie had begun shaking crumbs into Cameron's hair. "*It sounds like you saw the someone you loved with the wrong person… and your body reacted to it. Jealousy.*"

Neil had shaken his head at the time, still sceptical of the idea. But thinking on it again… Knox may have had a point; Neil did have a sort of strange obsession with Todd, and that obsession *could've* come from jealousy. Yes, jealousy—*that* was the reason why Neil couldn't

keep the boy's shy grin out of his head, or his soft laughter out of his daydreams, or his poetry out of the corners of his notes.

It made it easier, somehow.

If Todd was simply an obstacle to be overcome, so what if Neil had so thoroughly fumbled things with him? If Todd was Neil's rival, why should he care that the boy would never speak to him again? If Todd was… whatever Pitts had described him as, then Neil could forget about forgetting the night ever happened—it all hadn't mattered in the first place.

"Mr. Perry, are you still with us?"

Neil's head and attention shot up, wrenching him out of his thoughts to see the whole class, as well as Mr. Keating at the front, staring at him.

"Uh… yes, Captain. I am now."

Mr. Keating sat up from where he'd been leaning against the front of his desk. "Language was invented for one endeavour, boys," he continued. "Mr. Perry, now that you're back among the living, would you mind enlightening us on what that endeavour *was*?"

"To… communicate," Neil answered.

"No!" Mr. Keating exclaimed. Then he leaned forward, as if sharing a secret when he supplied, "To woo women."

It was still peculiar to Neil to hear a classroom fill with laughter—in Welton of all places, with a teacher present? A teacher who not only condoned the laughter, but who was the very source behind it? It was something Neil could get used to, he decided, as his mind wandered away again. This time it was to his English notebook, which he opened to a random page out on the desk in front of him.

Neil's English notebook, for the most part, had proven largely unnecessary so far. Partly because they simply hadn't had more than a handful of English lessons in total, as early on in the year as it was. But *mostly* it was because many of Mr. Keating's lessons thus far hadn't involved the classroom at all—and even when they had, notes had rarely been needed.

As such, Neil had taken to using his notebook to instead jot down anything and everything he found either amusing or interesting (or both) throughout the day. Almost akin to a journal, but with little and less structure as the pages progressed. Neil would copy down snippets of poems Mr. Keating read aloud, or particularly entertaining exchanges between Charlie and Knox, or short summaries of the events of the English lessons which had taken place outside the classroom. On the very first page, written in large, swooping letters, was the very first lesson that the Captain had taught them—*Carpe Diem. Seize the day.*

Neil had even tried his own hand at poetry, but how well *that* had gone was clear in the scribbled over stanzas crowding the pages. He just didn't have the gift, not like… *certain* blonde-haired boys Neil could name.

Why was language invented? he wrote down. *To woo women,* he pencilled beneath, before underlining the words with three quick strokes. He sat back to admire his work when Neil's eye caught at the edge of the paper, where a familiar few sentences were running up the margin. Speaking of certain, blonde-haired boys…

Neil hadn't been hyperbolising before; small patches of the poetry he'd glimpsed within Todd's book did indeed clutter up a good proportion of Neil's English notes. It stung a little, to write the words out, but he couldn't help it. Neil enjoyed quality writing—he was sensible enough not to let petty squabbles over girls get in the way of his admiration for genuine talent. He was above that.

Not that he remembered much; Neil had been so awestruck skimming through Todd's notebook, overwhelmed by what he was reading, that he'd ended up forgetting to commit many of the lines to heart. He could only recall three lines, the makings of a stanza whose end had fractured off in Neil's mad flurry through the pages. And it was those three lines that haunted his English notebook, now.

They went as follows.

To he who saddles atop a storm which clouds yet never breaks,

Atop a wind which spills the scree, and yet no whisper makes,

The Earth stark 'pon his shoulders, making mirthless of a grin…

Neil had attempted to complete the last couplet. But every line he'd tried felt like nothing more than a cheap stand-in—a patchwork job, mismatched with the other words. And so whenever he ran out of things to mark down in his notebook, Neil inevitably ended up writing out those three lines again—incomplete, yes, but also unspoiled. He couldn't help that he was fascinated, as much as Charlie would insist it was part of Neil's jealous obsession.

On that topic, Neil risked a look back at Charlie. Charlie, like much of the class, was currently distracted, watching Mr. Keating's unorthodox rendition of Shakespeare. And as much as Neil would've liked to join them, he couldn't help but think back to what Charlie had first harangued him when they'd walked in.

Charlie had first said it at the Society meeting, when Neil was being argued at from all sides on why yes, of course, he was *obviously* besotted with Ginny.

"*Imagine, Neil,*" he'd began. "*Imagine Todd, with Ginny, lying on the floor. Then when you're imagining that, focus on how you feel.*"

Neil had fidgeted with his hands, feeling like a fool with his eyes shut. "*I don't think it's working, Charlie*."

"*Try imagining them… holding hands,*" Knox had added.

"*Or kissing,*" Meeks had inputted.

"*Or—*"

"*Okay!*" Neil had announced, nipping whatever Pitts was about to say right on the bud and fluttering his eyes open. "*Not going to work.*"

But he hadn't really tried it, had he? And God knows Charlie wouldn't give it up until Neil gave it a shot. Where was the harm, really? If it didn't work, he could inform Charlie and—while Neil wasn't so delusional to think that would be the end of it—it would at least go a long ways in convincing the others to back off. Neil closed his eyes, hoping this spell of inattentiveness would go unnoticed by his teacher, and let the laughter of the class fade into quiet.

He pictured it. A domestic scene, sometime in the afternoon. Todd reading poems out to Ginny, lying beside each other on the

Danburry's living room rug. The sunlight streaming out from the window behind them, casting everything in a brilliant gold. Ginny picking the fluff off of Todd's sweater, Todd laughing at nothing but the moment and its perfection. Todd reaching up to pull a single, wayward curl out of Ginny's hair, before leaning forward and—

Oh.

Oh God.

That had felt—

That had felt *horrible*.

Which meant—

Neil felt himself break out into a cold sweat. His feet froze in his shoes, toes itching as if stinging with frostbite. Not even Mr. Keating's distant Marlon Brando or John Wayne impressions could distract him from the chilling pulse of nausea that overwhelmed him, like a wave crashing over him in the middle of a storm-broken sea.

Was Charlie Dalton—for the first time in his life—*correct* about something?

Chapter End Notes

Yeeeeeeaaaaaah they stupid

Sorry this kinda took awhile, the first 'chapter' of this chapter was taking me so long to do. I'm still not really happy with it, but whatever.

I'll try to get the next one out quicker, but it's pretty wordy as well....

Send Me Eyes With The Knowin' That I Could Pull It Off

Chapter Summary

> Neil auditions for Henley Hall's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where there's two unexpected, familiar faces in attendance.

Chapter Notes

> Full Disclaimer: I have absolutely no clue what the process for auditions for plays are. I was in a school musical in primary school and that's my only frame of reference so. Idk.
>
> Chapter title from Sexy to Someone ;)))))))))))))))))))))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie Dalton was never correct about anything in his entire life and Neil Perry had definitive, irrefutable proof.

It was honestly ridiculous, at this point, how many times Neil had believed the words coming out of the mouth of "*that Dalton boy*" (as Neil's father was fond of referring to him as)—only for them to be swiftly proven false.

When Charlie had barged into Neil's room one night and demanded they play a game of cards he'd just learned, Charlie had insisted that they would only play "*a couple rounds*," and that "*it won't even take half an hour, Neil, honest*." Several dozen rounds and close to two hours later, Neil had had to fight to get Charlie out of his room so he could return to what he was doing before; that being, studying for the geometry test he had the next morning—a test Neil had ended up being so exhausted for, that he'd ended up walking out of the classroom with a B minus.

When Charlie had had a particularly frustrating spat with Cameron, and had spent the majority of the weekend holed up in Neil's room

both smoking and complaining in equal excess, he'd confidently informed Neil that "*your roommate won't notice I've been here at all,*" and "*I won't even make all that much of a mess*." Unfortunately for Neil, his roommate *had* ended up noticing the pile of butts and ash brushed away under his bed, and the normally phlegmatic boy had yelled at Neil before subsequently banning both Charlie and cigarettes from the premises.

And now, only this morning, when Charlie had begged Neil to accompany him down by the lake so they could both begin on their poems for Mr. Keating's most recent assignment, he'd convinced Neil by promising "*the ground is perfectly dry, it barely rained at all last night,*" and "*no, this is not at all because Knox won't tell me about his poem. Why, did he tell you about it?*" and "Neil, *you're not going to slip, it'll be fine*." Neil had slipped within the first few steps of their journey down the hillside, streaking mud up the side of his white shirt. They hadn't even made any real progress on their poems; Neil had had no earthly clue what to write his on, and Charlie had been too busy to complete a single line—preoccupied decrying how unfair it was of Knox to keep his poem from him when "*it's going to be read out to the whole damn class anyway, what the hell is the point of* secrecy?"

Neil vowed never to take Charlie at his word again as he raced down the road away from Welton, as fast as his legs could pedal. But what was he going to do about it now? The damage was done, the wheels were turning, the consequences had arrived. His white shirt had been muddied, he'd had none in his wardrobe to replace it, and he'd ended up having to borrow one of Meeks'—which, all around, had taken far longer than he'd anticipated, because Meeks and Pitts were nowhere to be found. Really, how was he supposed to know they'd be on the *roof* of all places? Nevertheless, this was the situation he was in now.

He was going to be late for the auditions.

The auditions! Neil's irritation bled away as he left the towering school building behind, replaced by the sheer exhilaration he felt whenever he thought about the auditions. Even the worry whipping up his heartrate couldn't cloud it; he'd been impatient for them ever since he

first saw the poster announcing Henley Hall's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Neil had always wanted to act, as long as he could recall—he'd even wanted to try out for summer stock auditions last year, but naturally, his father hadn't let him. But now Neil's father was nowhere nearby and none the wiser, and Neil was determined to at least *try* theatre.

"*Carpe Diem,*" he whispered beneath his laboured breath, helplessly grinning against the wind in his face. "Even if it kills me."

He arrived at Everett Theatre legs aching and lungs prickling—but, if Meek's borrowed wristwatch was to be believed, only fifteen minutes late. He quickly parked his bike out front and slipped into the theatre as stealthily as possible, hoping not to disturb any auditions currently going on.

Neil needn't have worried; the entire theatre was darkened, and the noise of the actor's voice from up on the spotlighted stage masked any creaks of the door as he slipped in. Not that any of the people scattered around the seats were facing him, up at the back of the room as he was—all of them were positioned facing forward, watching the current auditionee.

Neil watched also, a roar of excitement fluttering in his chest as the stage's occupant—a tall, stocky boy with black hair—finished his monologue and took a bow; a bold, white smile on his face. Neil found himself smiling along, always excited to see an actor up on stage. The sparse audience, as well as the two adults Neil spotted near the front holding clipboards, gave the boy a polite applause. Neil applauded, too, and was about to scurry away backstage to await his own audition when he heard one of the clipboard carriers call out the next name.

“Ginny Danburry!”

Neil froze in the aisle as the girl slowly stepped out of the wings, blinking a little as she stepped out into the brightly lit centre of the stage. Yes, it was unmistakeably her—how could Neil not recognise the brunette curls and the polite posture, when the other poets interrogated him for such details day in and day out? One of the adults—Neil guessed they were the stage directors—signalled for Ginny to begin, and soon enough she broke out into the requested soliloquy.

Neil’s heart leapt, and his mind began to race—because if Ginny was here, could that also mean…? Neil scanned over the seats again. His gaze flitted over a group of girls in Henley uniforms, past a couple bored looking boys that were muttering between each other, until finally he landed up what he’d been seeking out—*who* he’d been seeking out.

He took a long, slow breath inwards.

He shouldn’t.

He *really* shouldn’t.

It wasn’t fair of him, he’d already done enough, what was Neil even going to—?

He walked over, seating himself behind the head of smooth, sandy-blonde hair he’d spotted.

“Hey,” he whispered, voice low as to not attract the ire of the stage

directors—wouldn't want to be on their bad sides before they even saw him perform.

Todd jumped in his seat, letting out a soft yelp. He spun around, eyes widening as they locked onto Neil.

"Sorry! Didn't mean to frighten you." Neil drummed his fingers on the back of Todd's seat, trying to ignore how the boy didn't even seem capable of looking Neil in the eyes—trying to ignore how much it seemed to sting. "I just wanted to ask you if…" Neil swallowed. "…if they've called my name yet?"

Todd's brow creased slightly, barely noticeable in the dim light, as he slowly shook his head.

"Great. Thanks."

And with that Neil knew all he'd needed from Todd. From here, he should shortly duck backstage and ready himself for when his name *was* inevitably called, because he'd received all the information he'd sat here for.

But—

Information wasn't *really* the reason he was sitting behind Todd Anderson, was it?

Neil lingered in his seat awkwardly, aware that he should be moving, yet unable to fully commit to the action. Because Todd was *right there*, sitting in front of him, and this was Neil's *chance*. To do *what*, exactly, he had no clue—but he knew, whatever it was, that he was unlike to

get another shot at it.

"So," he whispered, leaning only half an inch closer, "she's doing really good, isn't she?" When Todd stared confusedly at Neil, he gestured up towards the stage.

"O-Oh," Todd replied, curtly. "Y-Yes, she's b-been p-practising…"

Neil nodded. *Four whole words. Five if you count the "Oh."* It was progress.

He turned his attention back up to Ginny's performance which—he hadn't been lying to Todd about earlier—really *was* going well. He could tell that Ginny had been practising; her voice was clear and carried well across the theatre, she made sure to utilise the space to move with her lines, she placed emphasis at all the proper points. And even if some of her nervousness did show through—a couple lines could've used a little more room to breathe, instead of having their toes trodden on by the next—the emotion Ginny was flooding into her character made it easy to look past that.

Neil watched, enraptured, as Ginny poured out line after line. This was acting was all about, he thought; donning a mask, putting aside all that you were, speaking through another person—living through another *life*.

And it was *Ginny*.

Neil chewed on that thought. He was totally caught up in the swell of the moment, heart soaring as he grew impatient for his own audition, all because of *her*. Ginny, who apparently enjoyed acting—a passion Neil was growing more and more sure, the longer he watched, that he shared. Ginny, who all the poets had insisted he was hopelessly head-

over-heels for, who Charlie would needle him about constantly. Ginny, who… Neil was in love with?

Hm, he thought. He'd been convinced walking in, but looking again… he was beginning to doubt his conclusion.

He glanced aside to Todd, who was watching the performance with that sweet, secret smile of his tucked under his nose. His eyes had dots of spotlight reflected in them, literally sparkling with adoration, and he was resting his chin on his flat palm, pressing up the soft of his cheek. Neil could only imagine the horribly lovesick thoughts coursing through his head, all centred up on the girl on stage who Todd held so close to his heart, where he wouldn't ever let anyone else tread—

A familiar feeling spiked sudden and sharp in Neil's stomach, as if he'd been stabbed with it; he had to catch himself on the seat, wincing as he resisted the urge to beat his fist against the wooden frame, clutching at his abdomen with his other hand. The recognition came to Neil as pleasant as bile rising up his throat.

"*Jealousy*," he heard the memory of Knox explain.

Well, that confirmed it all anew. Neil was definitely in love with Ginny—it was the only feasible cause behind that *horrible* sensation.

Neil peered around to see if his reaction had caught any undue attention. No one else had noticed the outburst—no one except for Todd himself, who must've heard Neil's wince and swivelled in his seat to investigate further. He had an anxious look about him now, his perfect smile having vanished like the flame from a pinched candlewick.

Neil met his eyes. And was *lost*.

“I’m so sorry,” Neil said, before he had even registered his voice working.

Todd, clearly taken aback, swallowed. “S-Sorry?”

Neil, feeling his words begin to spill out again, explained, “I’m sorry I looked in your notebook. That night, at the Danburry’s.”

Todd’s eyes seemed to fall unfocused for a second. “O-Oh. I-It’s—”

“No, it’s not fine,” Neil interjected, in a whisper harsher than he’d meant. He took a long breath in. “Sorry, but— It was wrong of me. It was something personal of yours, and I invaded your privacy by looking at it.”

“O-Okay,” Todd muttered.

Neil trained his eyes on Todd’s, waiting for the boy to avert his gaze. He didn’t, thankfully.

“I’m *sorry,* Todd, I really am.”

Neil watched, in the theatre’s darkness, as Todd digested his apology. He couldn’t help but watch the apple of the other boy’s throat bob up and down, watch as he bit at his lower lip, watch as Todd shuffled nervously in his seat.

Finally, after a moment of deliberation, Todd muttered, “O-Okay.”

Neil blanked. That wasn’t the response he’d been expecting. “Is that… does that mean we’re we good?”

Todd nodded.

And the worst part?

He seemed to mean it.

“Okay,” Neil echoed. Then quickly added, “I hope this means we can still be friends, then.” He chuckled, lightly. It sounded more like a hiccup.

Todd looked up so sharply at that, Neil almost choked on his tongue.

“F-F-Friends?” Todd repeated back. Neil had no choice but to nod as emotions passed over Todd’s face, emotions Neil couldn’t read with what little light he had. God, he hadn’t overstepped, had he? He’d only *just* gotten the boy to forgive him, and now he’s gone and asked him to—

Todd smiled. Todd *smiled.* It was one of his small ones, just the ends of his mouth raising slightly, but it wasn’t just that. It was… *everything*. It was the leaves turning golden in the brisk fall air; it was the sun breaking through the fog on a cold, wintry morning; it was the very first blooming flower peeking past the snowmelt come springtime. Neil felt his cheeks quickly fill with heat.

Ginny finished with a flourish and a slightly dizzied expression on her face. She gave a humble curtsy as Neil swiftly broke into rapturous applause, drowning out the spaced out clapping of the rest of the crowd. Todd, though he look abashed to bring such attention to himself, joined Neil in his enthusiastic clapping. The display brought Ginny's eyes over the pair, and Neil caught the moment that she registered his presence. He could see her inhale almost invisibly, and her face turn pink, but she grinned down wildly at them anyhow.

"I best get back there too." Neil pulled himself reluctantly out of the seat, bidding farewell to Todd. He found himself thinking, as he waltzed back down the aisle, that he wouldn't have minded staying for a little longer—but no, he really did need to find his place backstage if he didn't want to miss his name being called. When Neil was only a few feet away, he heard a small voice call out meekly after him.

"G-Good luck!"

Neil turned, but Todd had already ducked his head back down. Still, Neil was stuck smiling as he scampered over to the door to navigate his way backstage. He may have also had a certain skip to his step—he couldn't help it, really, because he'd *done* it. He'd apologised to Todd, and the boy had accepted it!

Neil was still grinning as he joined the small crowd of figures huddled in the wings of the theatre, each nervously anticipating their own name being called. Neil was glad it was as gloomy as it was—from the feeling in his face, he guessed he was blushing something awful. *Must've been the bike ride*, he told himself.

Four more names were called, four more figures broke off from the group to perform their soliloquies onstage. Then, finally, it was Neil's turn—by the time his name was called his cheeks were hurting, and he had to carefully school his features before he walked out on stage.

Neil had practised the soliloquy with the poets countless times—mostly with Charlie, who would take any excuse to be away from his homework. Charlie had also never shied away from giving his honest, intricate (and oftentimes overexcessive) criticism. Occasionally, Neil practised it with Knox, who—in stark contrast to Charlie—could never seem to find a single flaw in the performance. When pressed on the matter, Knox would always put his hands out in front of him and assure Neil "it was perfect!" and that was that. Furthermore, Neil had also performed it at the most recent society meeting, hearing the words echo around the cave as his shadow danced along the wall. When he finally took his bow, the night had been filled with hooting and whistling and rapturous applause.

And Neil—well, he didn't want to let it get to his head, but…

Neil was *good*.

Neil was *really good*.

As he began, up there under the spotlight, he felt the words pulled from his mouth as if by the spirit of the character themselves. The mask slotted on perfectly—for as long as he spoke, he was no longer Neil Perry onstage in the Everett Theatre; he was a knavish sprite in a shaded grove in Athens, speaking of King Oberon, Queen Titania, and the Indian Changeling. He breathed sparingly throughout his speech, forcing himself to slow down so that every line, every word, every *syllable* was delivered with both utmost care and obvious delight. Every minute movement of his lips, hands, legs, whether deliberate or not, were no longer his—each one belonged to Puck, Robin Goodfellow, that merry wanderer of the night.

Neil slipped up only once.

The audience could hardly be seen from where he stood—but that didn't stop his eyes from wandering treacherously, seeking out the boy Neil knew was seated somewhere out among the dim seats. It was when Neil finally locked eyes on him that he made his error, stuttering slightly on the last word of his line.

Because.

Because.

Todd was watching him. Of course he was, he'd watched all of the performances, but *this*— Todd stared with awe evident in his expression; stars in his vision, mouth slightly agape, head pitched ever-so-slightly forward. Neil took a split second to drink in the sight. He had the abrupt, guilty thought that Todd hadn't looked at Ginny like that. He had been enamoured with Ginny's performance, sure, but it was Neil who'd left him astounded, bowled over and breathless. Neil swiftly continued on with his audition, but he couldn't shake the heady rush he'd gotten registering Todd's expression.

When Neil took a bow and exited the stage, he swore he heard one set of claps rise louder than the others—though that may have just been his imagination.

As he hurried over to the wing opposite where he'd entered from, he almost collided into another auditionee in his haste. He was about to apologise when he noted the chestnut curls, the brown eyes, the quiet smile.

"Ginny!" he called, lightheaded with exhilaration. He was excited to see her. He was excited to do anything, currently.

The girl shushed him, one finger over her curled lips, and pulled him

away from the stage. She led him further backstage, up to the room where the rest of those who'd already performed had gathered. Neil studied their faces—most seemed nervous; biting at fingernails and fussing with the script pages they'd no doubt been revising beforehand. Neil had his own stashed away in his breast pocket, but between the bike ride and seeing Todd, he'd forgotten that it was there. (Not that he'd needed the last-minute refreshing, turns out.)

Others, Neil observed, were simply quiet. Like Ginny was—silently awaiting for the auditions to come to an end and for roles to be announced soon after. Some loitering in the room's corners, some sitting on the floor with their backs up against the walls. Neil spied a couple of Welton upperclassmen whose names he couldn't quite place, chatting at a polite volume by the door.

Only a few had faces that matched what Neil suspected his own looked like; a giddying intoxication plain in the wide grin and blown-out eyes, a well of newfound energy bursting from every seam. As if the performance had been a surge of electricity, charging them up like a livewire. One of these was the boy Neil had seen performing when he first snuck into the theatre, the one with the broad chest and black hair, who spotted Neil looking around and gave him a mad smile.

"Neil! You were fantastic!" Ginny exclaimed from beside him.

"You were fantastic yourself, Ginny!" He clasped both of her hands in his. Though it was still relatively dark, Neil swore that he could see her face redden.

"Oh, n-no, I was kind of… stumbling over my lines the whole time…" She looked up, meeting Neil's eyes, before he could repute her. "You were extraordinary, though!"

Neil laughed, kindly. "Are you even able to see the performances from

in here?" he asked.

"Well— No," Ginny admitted. "But you can *hear* them. And you *sounded* incredible."

"Thanks," Neil said. "To be perfectly honest, I didn't expect to see anyone I knew here—I had no idea that you did theatre!"

"I don't normally," Ginny replied, sheepishly. "Chris had to talk me into it—she's, uh, she's my brother's girlfriend. She goes to Ridgeway as well."

Neil noticed she'd moved her eyes down to the floor as she spoke. *She really is perfect for Todd*, Neil thought, and the reminder sobered him enough to realise what his hands were doing. Realise that he was supposed to be *in love with this girl*. He awkwardly unlinked their hands, covering the action by quickly raking his fingers through his hair.

"I-I didn't know that you liked theatre, either!" Ginny stammered, seemingly not noticing the removal of Neil's hands.

"Well, I don't normally do it either. I've always wanted to try it, thought, and when I saw the notice sheet—!"

Neil couldn't communicate it into words. The rush he'd gotten grabbing the sheet, studying it over and over. He'd burst into the common room to belt out the good news to the poets, who'd all clapped him on the back and decorated him with encouragement. He'd been so thrilled he'd even tried telling his roommate about it, in one of their unceremonious interactions before lights out. The other boy had only muttered something along the lines of "good for you," before he clicked off his lamp, but it hadn't discouraged Neil none. He

had struggled to sleep a wink that night.

Ginny looked back up at him, eyes shining, and Neil felt all that excitement coil up inside him like a spring. He could almost hear the poets whispering in his ear—telling him to make a move, invite her somewhere, recite her a romantic line of poetry or two. Neil, now more than ever before, felt persuaded to do so—it was as certain as he'd been since he'd first returned to Welton that fateful night. Surely some of the rapid drumming in his heart had to be for her, right? And some of the constant whirring in his head? And maybe even the jitteriness in his limbs?

All of that had to mean something, right?

And yet Neil couldn't do it. He just… couldn't.

He swallowed all of his words down, and brought up some other topic for conversation instead. They continued to speak about whatever—the weather, school life, the upcoming rehearsals, anything mundane and small and safe.

The remainder of the auditionees yet to perform soon had their names called; one by one they joined Neil, Ginny, and the others, faces flushed with either anxiety or eager anticipation as they trickled in. One girl in a Henley uniform came off the stage crying, and Ginny excused herself so she could join the gaggle of girls already attempting to console her—apparently, Ginny recognised her from her time at the school. Neil nodded, and lost himself to his muddled thoughts once she'd left.

So he was nervous about speaking to Ginny in that manner. It was only natural. Except it wasn't, really, was it? Because that wasn't that the issue—something was preventing him from doing so, like a mental block.

He tried picturing it, *really* picturing it, like he had refrained from before. Him finding the words, biting the bullet, asking Ginny out. Him and Ginny walking through town in the snow, hand in hand, on a *date*. Him and Ginny standing on the doorstep of her house, wishing each other goodnight, Neil pressing a sweet little kiss to her lips.

He couldn't.

He couldn't do it.

Neil's thoughts ever only led to one thing, one person, one possible reason. And he was out there in the audience, no doubt biting his lips and dreaming up poetry in that magnificent mind of his. That was why Neil could never indulge in these thoughts—why he couldn't find the words, couldn't speak them aloud. He couldn't do it, not if it involved Todd being hurt in any small way. He'd *just* gotten the boy to speak with him again—could he really turn around and sink a knife into Todd's back like that?

Neil scolded himself. Todd was dating Ginny, Todd was dating Ginny, *Todd was dating Ginny—*

That was why Neil couldn't imagine himself with Ginny. That *had* to be the reason why.

"Hey. Was it Neil?"

Neil spun quickly, a little caught off guard by the voice breaking through his thoughts. It was the black-haired boy who'd smiled at Neil before who'd spoken—he must've wandered over without Neil noticing.

“Neil Perry.” Neil extended his hand, and the boy took it.

“Adam Connolly.”

Neil’s father had always tried to impart the lesson that one should judge a man by his handshake—usually as part of some chastisement of his son for an inadequate technique. Neil’s father would’ve loved Adam, then. He grasped Neil’s hand tight and shook it with a helpless enthusiasm Neil recognised—it was the same one pumping through his chest, too, after all.

“I just wanted to say that you did really well,” Adam commented. “Your friend, too.”

“Thanks,” Neil said. “I caught the last part of your audition—you did well yourself.”

“Cheers.” Adam was wearing an infectious grin as he eyed Neil. “So… you go to Welton.”

Neil sighed, entertainedly. “What gave it away?”

“Well, you’re wearing the uniform, and…” Adam trailed off, scrunching up his face. “Oh, you were joking.”

“It was a fairly bad joke, sorry,” Neil quickly covered. “Anyway, yes, I’m a Welton survivor—or, well, the survivor part of that remains to be seen.” Adam got *that* one, and chuckled. “Where do you go?”

“Ridgeway.”

“Oh, so you would know Ginny and Todd, right?”

“I know *of* them,” Adam said. “Not very well, in either case— They, uh. Keep to themselves, mostly.”

Neil hummed. “Yeah, I can imagine that…”

“How do you know them?”

“I had dinner with Ginny’s parents. Todd was over, he was the one who let me in,” Neil recalled fondly. “I mistook him for Ginny’s brother, at first.”

“You mistook Todd for Chet?” Adam laughed. “I can’t believe it. He’d be furious to hear that.”

“You know Chet, too?”

“We were both on the school football team last year,” Adam supplied. “He’s… an interesting sort. A little intense, to be honest.”

“So I’ve heard.” Neil grimaced sympathetically. “You know he used to go to Welton?”

“Yeah,” Adam said, a short huff of laughter coming out with the word. “Flunked out, didn’t he? No offence, but I’m not surprised.” It was Neil’s turn to chuckle.

It was then that one of the stage directors entered the room, ushering people back to the seating of the theatre. Though they didn’t say what for, everybody in the room knew. The air buzzed with trepidation as people began to clear out of the exit—roles were to be announced.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Neil. And best of luck.” Adam placed his hand on Neil’s shoulder. “Let’s hope we see each other at rehearsals, hey?”

“Here’s to hoping,” Neil replied. “And best of luck as well!” Then Adam was off.

Neil milled around as the auditionees flooded out of the wing, waiting for Ginny. She joined him a moment later, and they began to pick their way through the door. The girl who’d been crying before, Neil noted, was now merely puffy-eyed—and smiling over the top of it, dabbing at her dried tears with a handkerchief Neil could’ve sworn he’d seen Ginny use back when he visited.

“That was a lovely thing to do,” he muttered to Ginny as they hurried through the hallways.

Ginny merely sighed. “I just hope she’s okay now. She’s so hard on herself.”

Emerging out into the auditorium proper, Neil and Ginny immediately spied Todd, who was shyly waving them over—they soon joined him, Neil sitting in the exact same seat he’d occupied when he’d spoken to Todd before. The usually reserved boy embraced Ginny as he

congratulated her, and Neil tried his best not to burn holes with his eyes into the back of Ginny's head as they did. It was nice to have his feelings reaffirmed, he supposed, those feelings being *sickening amounts of envy*. It was soon forgotten as Todd stuttered through a congratulations for Neil as well, who felt as if his heart was going to burst. (From the suspense of roles being called, of course.) It was evident that Todd still wasn't wholly comfortable speaking to Neil, from the way he stared down and had his cheeks flushed the whole time—but Neil understood, and was honestly just relieved that Todd was willing to speak to him in the first place.

The two stage directors—who Ginny had apparently seen around Henley all the time, and yet never the learned names of—mounted the stage, not even needing to call for attention as the people gathered in the seats fell quiet in an instant. One of them fussed about with reviewing both clipboards while the other spoke out to the auditionees, listing off introductions and instructions and a whole lot of other busywork that, notably, was *not* who received which role. Eventually the one fussing finished up and cleared her throat, leaving the theatre so silent Neil could hear his own heartbeat in his ears. She began reading out her list.

The crying girl, despite her dramatics—or maybe because of them—landed the role of Helena. Her friends, as well as Ginny, clapped loudly and patted her on the back as she stood in the centre of them, shocked.

Adam was given the role of Oberon. Neil thought it suited him—from what he had heard, Adam had a deep, commanding voice, and his bulky frame would fill out the fairy king's powerful presence nicely. He applauded with the rest, nodding at Adam when he turned to Neil.

Ginny, the director announced, would play Hermia. At that Ginny's eyes widened and her jaw dropped, as both Neil and Todd immediately broke out into cheers—well, Neil did at least. Todd hugged Ginny and patted her on the back, smiling brightly at her surprised face. Neil imagined that Todd probably wanted to kiss her then, and turned away so that the look that passed his face wouldn't

ruin Ginny's moment.

But Neil couldn't hold onto the sour mood. In fact, he couldn't imagine himself ever having a single sour mood again. How could he?

Because Neil was going to be Puck.

Neil was going to be *Puck*.

Neil felt as if maybe he had heard the woman onstage incorrectly, but the clapping coming from all sides and Ginny felicitating him in his hear and Adam mouthing "congratulations" out of the corner of his eye brought him back to reality. It took all of Neil's strength not to cry out with happiness.

And Todd. *Todd*. Todd was grinning at Neil like nothing he'd ever seen before. Neil's gaze met Todd's and for a few seconds, the applause faded in his ears and all his brain could process was Todd's smile.

Sure, it was uneasy. A little shaky. Things weren't entirely smooth between them yet.

But to Neil, it was *perfect*.

Neil felt his chest swell. He wished that he could live in this moment forever—him being given the role of Puck, Todd smiling up at him. It was perfect, all of it, perfect. And Neil wished it never had to end.

Chapter End Notes

So originally I did not plan to have any schedule with updating

but I've just kind of accidentally started always doing it on the weekend? So that's what we're doing now ig look out saturdays or sundays :)

Also thank you to everyone who kudos and comments I hope you all know I would give my life for yours

When I Cry, I Wanna Give You A Ring

Chapter Summary

Neil slowly realises he just might be obsessed. The problem is that it's with the wrong person.

Chapter Notes

you'll never guess where this chapter title came from

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil fiddled with the papery edges of his English notebook, an unfamiliar sort of nervousness pooling in his stomach. The sensation was foreign to him—he'd never truly felt *anxious* about performing in front of others, especially not about something as mundane as an assignment for school.

In fact, he'd ordinarily be thrilled; composing an original poem, to then perform in front of the class? When first announced by Mr. Keating, only last week, it had seemed like it would be right up Neil's alley. He had flourished in similar assignments previously, never hesitating to stand up the front and read out an essay or such—he'd even *indulged* in the opportunity, feeding that longing for the stage that had existed in him well before the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

How was this any different than presenting those previous assignments? Or soliloquising on the stage during auditions? Or even performing his lines at rehearsals?

It was the poem. It had to be. It was the poem—the one Neil had spent the whole weekend deliberating over, scratching uselessly at his page and scalp until the former was scribbled over and the latter was sore. The poem that he'd pencilled about three dozen versions of into his notebook, only to cross it through each of those three dozen times and

start from scratch. The poem that he'd only had half finished until last night, when he'd had his eyes drooping and his consciousness fading, but forced himself to complete regardless. The poem written on a page that had since been torn from his notebook, now sitting folded in Neil's blazer breast pocket, feeling as if it were burning through the fabric.

At the front, Knox finished up his poem—a short but sweet ode to the season of autumn. Why hadn't Neil written something of *that* sort? A piece that described, succinctly, some small fondness of the heart, but otherwise revealed little about the author themselves. No offence to Knox, but his admiration for the fall leaves didn't exactly invite a deeper literary analysis; he enjoyed the season, he enjoyed its colours, he enjoyed its… boldness. What more was there to read into?

Yes, *that's* what Neil should have written. Something as pretty and light as dandelion fluff, something that had no meaning curtained behind its words, something about Neil's passion for acting or his passion for society meetings or anything but his passion for—

He considered scribbling over his poem, lying to Mr. Keating and claiming he simply hadn't written anything for the assignment. Would he get in trouble? Would the Captain be disappointed in him? What would he do—would he fail Neil for not writing a poem? Whatever would happen, Neil didn't get a chance to explore it. After Knox was finished blushing at his scattered applause (and one loud whistle which, along with the majority of the applause, he had Charlie to thank for), Mr. Keating met Neil's eyes and gestured towards him.

"Now, Mr. Perry. Would you care to perform for us next?"

Neil tried swallowing his nerves—they went down his throat as pleasantly as shards of gravel. *No one will know*, he reasoned. *How could they know?* He flashed his classic, enthused smile and pushed himself out of his desk before swaggering to the front, giving Knox a congratulatory pat on the shoulder as he passed. He held his back

straight, posture perfect, as he produced the torn-edged notebook page out of his pocket with a subtle flourish.

Then he began to read aloud.

"*With you,*

every smile's a secret.

A cupped fist closed 'round

the flame of a candle.

No breeze may blow it out,

it is safe, yes,

but your hands are left

blackened and burnt.

"And the beat of your laugh's

but a breath,

stuffed back in your throat,

as if it were ugly.

As if it were anything but

the song of wind

tracing over

freshly fallen snow.

"With you,

every word's a whisper.

I can't help but wonder

how it'd sound—

You shouting,

'cross the eaves at dawn,

waking the world with the wit

you keep hidden.

"All of you's hidden—

let me see."

Neil had managed to keep his voice from wavering throughout his reading, but couldn't help but feel dizzy when he looked up from the page. His chest felt lighter, his head was spinning, and he loosed a breath that he hadn't known he' d been holding—the noise echoed through the silence of the room, as Neil gauged his peers' reactions.

Most of his classmates wore faces of either mild confusion or plain disinterest. Which was both expected, and manageable; there were no issues on *that* particular front. The poets, however, were grinning, and Neil couldn't help but feel just the smallest needle of panic at the sight —especially when he spotted Charlie's signature smirk, the one that meant he could see through you as easily as a window he'd just broken. And Mr. Keating… the Captain himself seemed to be studying Neil with a shrewd expression, one that was unreadable in its short existence before it was replaced with a kind, encouraging smile.

"Well, Mr. Perry, that was quite the stirring piece," Mr. Keating remarked, as Neil shuffled back to his desk. "Touching upon—and forgive me in my assumption—one of the major themes. Love." Neil very nearly tripped over his own damn feet. He took his seat sharply, prepared to correct Mr. Keating, but the Captain had already moved on to calling up a reluctant-looking Hopkins.

Well, Mr. Keating had, himself, admitted that it had only been an assumption. And though Neil had thus far considered his English teacher to be singularly infallible, it wasn't… outside the realm of possibilities for him to misinterpret the situation, wasn't it?

It got far worse at lunch.

"Neil!" Charlie crooned, throwing his arm over Neil's shoulder as he sat beside him at the table. "You sly dog! You told us you *weren't* going to write a love poem!"

Neil scoffed, pushing Charlie away. "I didn't," he said, grabbing his fork and poking it at the spaghetti piled on his plate. Hoping to deter any further questioning, he spoke up quickly. "Well, Charlie? Did they add enough meatballs this time for your liking?"

Charlie, undeterrable as ever, continued, "Oh, *sure* you didn't write a love poem— And I suppose Knox's poem was *literally* about how much he loved 'dancing with autumn leaves', then, hm?"

Four confused heads—one of them being Neil's, how glad he was to be *part* of the gawking crowd this time rather than its target—swivelled on Charlie, who only redirected their confused glances, with a casual nod, towards Knox. Knox, who was currently staring intently at his meal, cheeks burning.

"Was it… *not* about that?" Pitts asked.

"Go ahead, Knox," Charlie goaded, a peculiar venom creeping into his tone. "Do you have something to share with the group?" He lowered his voice, into a low hiss. "Or *someone*—?"

Knox's eyes flicked up towards Charlie, pupils dark and dilated, before swiftly returning back down to his food.

"No," he mumbled.

Across the table, Cameron sighed. "What have you done to him, Dalton?" he asked, pointing his cutlery accusingly.

Charlie stabbed at his spaghetti, stuffing a forkful into his mouth. "I didn't do anything," he answered, words muffled around the meatball he was chewing on. He swallowed, wiping his simper on his sleeve, the last traces of his odd bitterness bleeding away as he continued. "Just something I picked up on, is all. Like how I noticed how stupidly lovesick Neil was—"

"I was not lovesick!"

"You read out a love poem, to the whole class, and…"

"It wasn't a love poem!" Neil cried.

"It was," Knox jumped in, voice firm enough to cut short Neil and Charlie's usual bickering. He shot Neil a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry," he said, a little quieter, "but it really was."

Neil looked disbelievingly between the faces at the table with him. First Mr. Keating, and now *this*?

“H-How?” he stammered. “How was it a love poem?”

Knox coughed, ready to launch into his explanation, but Charlie butted in before he could begin.

“Well, for starters, you had this distant, dreamy look about you the whole time,” he pointed out, ignoring the insulted Knox opposite him.

“Right— And he *sounded* different, too,” Pitts added.

“And that last line, about wanting to… *see* her?” Meeks supplied. “Pretty damning.”

Neil turned to Cameron, daring him to comment further. He realised belatedly he should’ve known better than to ask as the red-haired boy merely shrugged. “Even Mr. Keating caught onto it.”

Charlie patted Neil gently on the shoulder. “Sorry, Neil,” he said, not even pretending to really mean it, “but if even *Cameron’s* onto you, I think the jig is up.”

“Hey, screw you Dalton—”

Neil pushed Charlie off again. “It— It— It *wasn’t* though…” he sputtered, though his determination trailed off with the sentence. He picked at his pasta, favouring nibbling at it rather than attempting once more to defend himself, carefully avoiding the other poet’s gazes.

Charlie huffed out his exhaustion. “Neil, if that poem wasn’t about

your head-over-heels love for Ginny— What *was* it about?"

Neil swallowed his bite of food the wrong way and began to choke.

Neil couldn't even blame Charlie; it was a fair question. More than fair, in fact, it was only the most logical question to ask next—Neil's poem was so clearly about *someone*, and if it wasn't about Ginny, then who was it about? It was something that, had Neil been asked about it only earlier that morning, he would've (if not happily) answered, but now… answering was almost *certainly* an impossibility. Because even if Neil knew it wasn't a love poem—a fact he was becoming little and less sure of, to his alarm—he knew he was going to be hard pressed to convince any of the other poets of that.

And, well, if the poets thought it was a love poem—

He couldn't just confess that the poem had been about *Todd Anderson*, could he?

Neil honestly couldn't have helped himself if he tried. Ever since auditions, he'd been incapable of getting Todd out of his head—scratch that, ever since he'd first laid eyes on him, opening the door to the Danburrys', he hadn't been able to get Todd out of his head. A cursory glance at Neil's English notebook was all you needed to have proof of that—the boy's poetry literally infested the thing. Neil had needed some sort of outlet for all of his… harmless rumination. And so what if that outlet had been a poem he'd been assigned to write for an assignment?

Neil was brave enough to admit—in his mind, to no one—that he'd never *really* held any animosity towards Todd, no matter how often the poets insisted that he rightfully should. There had been the occasional feverous jealousy boiling a pit into Neil's stomach, yes, but besides that? The only reason there was for him to dislike Todd was

that he was dating Ginny—and although the thought made Neil's heart sink to his feet, it wasn't being done *maliciously*. Ultimately, Todd was a decent guy. Better than decent, he was *perfect*, and Ginny was perfect for him.

And yet Neil was frustrated. Whether it was with himself, or with Todd, or with the fates themselves, he hadn't yet decided. Because for all Todd's perfection, the boy adamantly refused to share it with anyone except Ginny. He always seemed so nervous, so unwilling to share any piece of himself—not around Neil, at least.

Which Neil… accepted, at the moment, but *damn* if it didn't make him miserable to witness. It was almost as if Todd didn't even realise his own brilliance, as if he was ashamed of how his smile looked (like a painting begging to be framed) or how his voice sounded (like a song which wormed into your ear). As if Todd couldn't comprehend how he occupied so much more space in Neil's brain than he reasonably should, for reasons Neil was yet to ascertain why.

But now?

Now, Neil couldn't possibly explain any of that to the other poets.

Not when they believed that it was a *love poem* he'd written.

Which was ridiculous—so what if the lines Neil had written through his bleary stupor had a… slightly *unorthodox* fixation with Todd's hands? Or his smile. Or his laughter… and had Neil really read it aloud in a voice different than his own? Or had a distant, dreamy look on his face throughout the whole duration? Well of course he'd had a strange look about him—he was concentrating on his performance, after all. Concentrating on not confusing his words, on not swapping his lines around, on keeping the image of Todd right in the forefront of his mind the entire time so that he… never forgot who the subject

of the poem was…

And he'd finished it with the line "*Let me* see," which was…

…oh.

Oh God.

Neil had written a love poem about Todd Anderson.

No.

Worse than that.

Neil had written a love poem about Todd Anderson and *performed it in front of his whole English class.*

Neil had no time to parse the horror slowly dawning on him before a harsh slap between his shoulder blades brought him spiralling back to reality. Coughing, he glared pointedly at Charlie, who was retreating the offending hand without an ounce of guilt on his face.

"What? You were choking," he explained, deadpan. "Now, I believe you were going to tell us what your poem was about?"

Neil swallowed—the food going down the proper tract this time, thank goodness—as he flitted his gaze around the table, seeing what his friends made of his interrogation. All the poets were waiting with

bated breaths, eager for answers, of course. All except for Knox. Knox was watching Neil with an intent stare and an unreadably flat expression, as if Neil's answer was both the least of his concerns and the only thing that mattered.

Neil held his hands up in defeat. "Fine," he relented, stretching out the syllable until he felt his frustration had been properly conveyed. "You caught me. It *was* a love poem…" He chewed on the inside of his cheek. "…about Ginny."

"As I thought," Charlie replied, grinning smugly.

"Hold on," Meeks cut in, confused. "That doesn't make sense. If it was Ginny the whole time— Why'd you try and hide it then?"

"Yeah, Neil," Knox added, not even looking, attention turned to depositing his unwanted meatballs onto Charlie's plate. "Why try and hide it so hard?"

"Well…" Neil fiddled with the tablecloth. He smiled with what he hoped looked like guilt staining his teeth. "I mean, you guys are probably sick to death of me going on and on about her, right? I guess I just didn't want to admit I was doing… more of that."

"But you *don't* go on and on," Knox replied, with a cadence which Neil couldn't tell if he found reassuring or accusatory—it certainly *burned* like the latter.

"Feels like I do, I guess," Neil muttered. "Anyway, I've said my piece now. Now it's your turn, Knox."

Knox paused, meatball caught in transit halfway over the table. “My turn?”

“To tell us who was *your* poem really about.”

“He’s right!” Charlie declared, snatching the meatball off of Knox’s fork with his bare hand. “It’s your turn to spill, Knoxious.”

Neil breathed a small sigh of relief as he and the other poets turned back to their lunches, leaving Charlie to grill Knox for the true meaning of his poem. Apparently it was “blatantly about someone else,” and Charlie was “entitled to know who it was,” but Knox only ever deflected in response, and Neil soon tuned the pair out. He’d barely had two bites of his spaghetti, but at some point in the previous discussion he’d lost his appetite. So instead, he listlessly traced his fingers on the underside of the table, allowing the noise of Charlie and Knox quarrelling to wash over him.

The rest of the day was much the same; something was nagging Neil at the very back of his mind, something out of the edge of his periphery, something he was aware of but couldn’t pinpoint for the lift of him. It was embarrassing, really. He stumbled through the rest of his subjects, was told by Stick that he seemed “distracted” at dinner, and excused himself from the study group early. Citing exhaustion from a bad night’s sleep prior (which wasn’t entirely false), he was up out of his seat and through the door before any of the poets could argue.

In the solitary of his room, with his roommate nowhere in sight, Neil fell onto his bed in a heap. Carefully, with tingling fingers, he slid out the poem he’d read earlier that day out of his blazer pocket. It had sat there, all day, listening to the beating of his heart beside it. He read it again, with fresh eyes, tasting the words all anew as he whispered them to himself under his breath. And they were all still the same lines he’d written and then read out, unchanged on the page—but between them something new had coiled itself, lying in wait like a

serpent with its fangs bared. Neil exhaled sharply through his teeth.

Then he sat up, carefully refolded the page, and tossed it into the wastebasket.

Whatever it was that was eating him, whatever it was that was haunting his thoughts, whatever it was that had inspired him to do such a foolish thing—*it'll go away with time*, he reassured himself.

He went to bed, pretending that he felt any better.

And ignoring that he *didn't*.

It didn't go away with time.

As Neil began his cycle back to Welton, he manoeuvred his hand so that he could wave the couple off, the movement made awkward by the lamp tucked under his arm. Ginny waved back affectionately, grinning like she only ever did after a full rehearsal—bright, but sluggish with exhaustion. Todd also returned Neil's wave, albeit shyly and with his cheeks flushed. (Todd would always wait outside the theatre whenever rehearsals ended so that he could walk Ginny home, no matter how cold the weather was. It explained why his face was always red when Neil and Ginny had to pull him into the theatre lobby.)

Neil felt his heart rust over as he turned his attention back to the road. He couldn't help it, however much he hated feeling that way towards two people he thought so fondly of. The sensation, the 'hunger' in his stomach, the prickling in his abdomen—his jealousy had only gotten

worse.

And now—

Now, there was something else.

It was Todd.

Neil couldn't even enjoy rehearsals today. And he *always* enjoyed rehearsals—the buzzing heat of the spotlight, the echo of the lines he read bouncing off of the walls of the theatre, the sound of his socks scuffing across the stage as he entered a scene. It filled him with a happiness like a fever, like nothing else in his life had before.

Neil loved being Puck. It was as if his previous life of polite smiles, firm handshakes, and answering "yes, sir" every single second had melted away with the morning mist. What was left behind was the life of a grinning, mischievous spirit whose only concerns were playing pranks, messing with mortals, and making merry in moonlit clearings in the Athenian woods. For as long as he was on stage, Neil forgot about whatever was worrying him, and was simply allowed to *be*. It was an unfamiliar—but fairly intoxicating—feeling.

Neil loved being backstage. Backstage, Neil lounged about with the other members of the cast, sometimes talking so much a stage director would have to come in and yell at them to be quiet. Mary, the girl playing Helena (who'd cried and been comforted by Ginny during auditions), turned out to be quite talkative when she wasn't sobbing. She often pulled Neil into lengthy discussions about all of her friends (and countless rivals) back at Henley Hall, explaining in detail why they were so wonderful (or, in her rivals' cases, wicked—the devil incarnate). Neil had already sworn to deny a few select girls should they ask him to dance at the next Welton/Henley formal, and in turn Mary had promised to provide the poets with suitable partners for the

night should they need them.

Adam proved talkative, too—though Neil had expected as such. They only seemed to ever make small talk about either rehearsals or Chet, but that had proven to be enough. Adam recounted anecdotes from his time on the football team last year, and Neil recalled whatever he could from the years of Welton he'd shared with the Danburry boy. It wasn't exactly thought-provoking conversation, but it sure was entertaining. Adam nearly doubled over with laughter when Neil relayed how Chet once flunked one of McAllister's tests so terribly that he'd had to write out Latin phrases until his hand was cramping, and Neil couldn't wait to inform Knox of the time Chet received a red card for giving his *own teammate* a blackeye for "staring at Chris for too long".

And then there was Ginny, of course. Neil loved spending time with her anywhere in the theatre, or out. Whether it was their shared conversations after rehearsals, joined by a shivering Todd after convincing him he was allowed inside; or in the dim wings, failing to cover up their giggles at the scenes featuring the mechanicals; or pilfering through the many props held backstage, becoming so distracted with pointing out peculiar paraphernalia to one another that they eventually forgot which prop they'd been sent in to fetch in the first place.

That last misadventure had actually led to the discovery of the lamp Neil now had tucked under his arm—the one that he was eager to share with the other poets, along with the most recent news of how he and Ginny were moving along.

Whenever he talked to the other society members about it, they patted him on the back and congratulated him, encouraging him to continue on with it. Charlie had begun insisting that Neil take "the next step," at which Neil would always laugh and look away. He was genuinely enjoying himself around Ginny, she seemed to be enjoying his company as well, and the entire Dead Poets Society were clearly enthusiastic in their support of Neil's… pursuit. Everyone was happy, right?

Until the chatter around the common room died down, or Neil hopped on his bike to return to Welton, or the lights dimmed after one of his scenes concluded. Then something in his stomach would constrict, and he'd feel the happiness slough off of him—a *problem* taking its place.

A problem with suspiciously sandy-blonde hair and powder-blue eyes.

Neil didn't hate Todd.

But what had begun as an accidental love poem had become increasingly worrying. He hated how much the boy consumed his mind, how every single little laugh of his would send Neil spiralling, how weak Neil was to deny him anything he asked of him in those all-too-brief conversations after rehearsals. Neil hated how his mind sizzled with useless radio static whenever Todd was around, how when Todd *wasn't* around Neil couldn't stop thinking about him, and did he mention that Todd had infiltrated Neil's *poetry* for God's sake—

It was as if Todd was the sun, and Ginny the stars. She was magical, entrancing, but when Todd was around—she simply vanished amidst Todd's brilliance.

Neil hurried on distractedly, passing through the gates of Welton with thoughts heavy in his skull. Once he parked his bike, he almost sprinted up to his room. Chances were the poets were already well on their way to the cave now—Neil couldn't be late, not when he had a deity to present. He was surprised, when he burst open his own door, to find his roommate at his desk for once. Neil gave the boy a nod, and his roommate nodded back. He was well used to Neil's shenanigans by now—he barely flicked his eyes down at the dishevelled-looking idol clasped in Neil's hands, having decided long ago that it was too much of a bother to question any of Neil's antics. Neil strode over to his own desk, fetched out the well-worn copy of *Five Centuries of Verse*, and then was off again.

Maybe Neil needed to be *more* in love with Ginny, more devoted to her, infatuated with her until it bordered on psychosis. Then maybe he'd be able to shake this… *fascination* with Todd that had settled on his shoulders. But no—Neil wasn't, and so whenever he felt things slotting into place (for once), that horrid something would come trickling down his spine, forcing him towards inaction. He'd pull back, flinch his hand as if burnt, never taking that fabled next step.

Neil pondered the issue further as he listened to the melody of Charlie's saxophone reverberate around the cave, the god of which now being nursed on his knee after its introduction to the group. The notes making up Charlie's so-called 'poetrusic' were… curiously pleasant to Neil's ears, for something spawned from the mind of *the* Charlie Dalton. And his shock was clearly a sentiment shared between the poets; out of the corner of his eye, Neil spotted as one by one his friends slowly grew still, the laughter that had filled the cave only moments ago washed away by the music flowing out of the flared brass. Soon enough, they were all listening devoutly, only shooting the occasional glance to one another to convey their mutual amazement.

Charlie finished his piece kneeling in front of Knox, like a poet of old serenading his muse, as the boys broke into applause. All except Neil, of course, who was staring at the peeling paint of his god. Charlie stood up, ruffling Knox's hair as he did, and Neil caught a soft crimson filling Knox's cheeks as Charlie returned to his seat.

"Th-That was great!" Knox stammered. "Where'd you learn to play like that?"

Charlie began to explain his learning of and subsequent disdain for the clarinet—something Neil was already well aware of—but Neil heard little of it. His mind was elsewhere; pipe smoke whirled in the air and the god stared up at Neil from its pedestal on his lap as he reflected on his situation. He tried to imagine moving forward with Ginny, he really did. He thought of each step as a single tableau, a scene to be played, a photograph to pose for within his mind's eye—and as

expected, each one fell back to Todd before Neil had barely begun staging it.

Neil imagined holding Ginny's hands, twining together fingers and tracing the lines of her palms with his thumb. It was dark, some tucked-away corner backstage, but Neil held on tight and Ginny did the same so they had no chance of losing each other. Except they never felt like Ginny's hands—the hands he held felt rougher, were shivering, and had pieces of cuticle picked off their nails by nervous fidgeting. He brushed fingers over the skin, and could hear Todd's breath hitch as if it were more than a daydream.

Neil imagined throwing an arm around Ginny's shoulder, pulling her close and laughing with her as they walked out of the theatre. Except the figure laughed back with a voice deeper and shakier than Ginny's —and where once the contact had felt cool, it now seared against Neil's skin, warm and scintillating. Neil also found that they no longer stood just outside the theatre; instead, they were on a street corner a few blocks down from the Danburry's, the very same place where Neil had returned Todd's poetry book—where he'd confessed to having read a couple of lines, where he'd scared the boy off. The boy wasn't scared now, though, resting his head on Neil's shoulder, the weight of it like an anchor.

Neil, growing antsy at this point, went drastic—he imagined leaning in close to Ginny and kissing her. Something overtly chaste, nothing more than a quick press of lips and a few sweet words exchanged. But when Neil pulled back he found himself staring at wide-blown eyes that were blue (not brown) and tracing his fingers in circles through hair that was blonde (not chestnut). And when he went to whisper something into the space occupied by nothing but his and Todd's shared breaths, Todd surged forward and silenced him with another kiss, muttering poetry into Neil's mouth, all of the poetry Neil wanted to hear from him—

Neil stood sharply, almost toppling over from the suddenness of his movement. The god of the cave clattered to the earth below, and the poets' previous discussion was forgotten immediately as all eyes were

turned to Neil.

"Uh… sorry," Neil muttered, and made to sit down once more.

"No, no," Charlie insisted. "Looks like Perry's had a breakthrough." He turned to Neil, smirking. "Well, have you?"

Neil reverently picked the effigy of god up, placing it on his seat. "I… think so."

"Well." Charlie laid back, threw his hand behind his head. "Let's hear it then."

Neil wet his lips, beginning to pace. "I think…" He looked between the faces of the poets, the study group, his friends. "I think I need to do something…"

"About what?" Pitts asked.

"About *who*," Meeks corrected. He looked up at Neil. "It's *who*, right?"

Neil nodded. "I— I think I've been going about this whole Ginny thing wrong." *More in love with her, I need to be more in love with her*. "I've been too…"

"…passive?" Knox suggested, knowingly.

"Yes!" Neil snapped his fingers. "I've been too passive!"

Neil remembered Charlie's words, only minutes prior. *Gotta be more, gotta do more*. The words sped through his mind like a mantra. He couldn't wait for his heart to catch up—if he wanted to be more in love with Ginny, he had to *act*.

"I've gotta do something."

"What are you gonna do?" Cameron asked.

Neil smiled as he raced towards the mouth of the cave, almost tripping over the god in his haste. It felt good to be moving, whisking his body away so fast his thoughts had no time to form. Had no time to imagine the phantom feeling of one boy's mouth on his own—

"Hey! Where're you going?" Charlie called out after him.

Neil spun around just before he clambered out of the entrance. "I'm gonna call her!" he answered back, a frantic tone to his voice. Then he was running back to Welton, hoping the brisk air would disguise the warmth in his face.

He just had to focus on Ginny. That's all he had to do. As he heard the poets piling out of the cave behind him, he found himself laughing madly—this had to work. It had to.

Please let this work, he prayed, hoping to hell that that lamp's ears could hear him.

The clunky telephone stationed in the hallway for use by the Welton student body made heavy, metallic clicks as Neil spun the dial. He tried to hold his hands steady as the receiver began to ring in his ear. There was no going back now.

He flashed a smile at the poets gathered around him, and the call went through. Neil breathed in. He was doing this—*he was doing this*.

“Hello?” came Ginny’s voice from the other end.

“Hey, Ginny!” Neil answered, hoping the slight tremor to his voice was hidden well enough. “It’s Neil.”

“Oh, Neil! How are you?” Ginny’s voice dipped with a crackle. “Is… everything alright?”

“Yes, everything’s… swell.”

He looked between the poets. Knox was leaning against the wall beside the phone, gaze fixed as he listened in on the call. Charlie was resting his hand on Knox’s shoulder, grinning at Neil. Meeks and Pitts shared a curious look, while Cameron was tilting his head as if to hear the conversation better. When Neil caught his eye, he motioned for him to continue.

“How are you?”

“I’m alright,” Ginny mumbled through the wire. “I’m… actually glad you called.”

Neil covered the transmitter with the flat of his palm. “She’s glad I called,” he mouthed to his enraptured audience. “Oh?” he replied, removing his hand from the end of the phone. “Why’s that?”

“I was going to bring it up at rehearsals today, but I forgot…” Neil heard her sigh. “I’ve been struggling to remember my lines, and I was wondering… if you would…?”

“Help run lines with you?” Neil finished, and he felt the excitement buzz through the onlooking poets like lightning. It was contagious, and mightily encouraging. “I’d love to help! If you could help me run through mine, of course.”

“I’d love to!” Ginny chirped. “Though you seem to know yours so well already…”

“Oh, I always need practice. When will you be free? Sometime this weekend?”

“What about Sunday?” Ginny suggested. “My parents have a guest over in the morning, so… maybe in the afternoon?”

“Does twelve o’clock work?” Ginny made a small, affirmative noise. “I’ll see you at noon on Sunday, then.”

“See you then, Neil!”

Neil slid the phone back into its slot, and his back down the wall. He stared up at the ceiling, feeling something build up in his chest.

Charlie beat him to it. “YAWP!” he yelled, startling Knox, who caught the cry right in his hear.

“Jesus, Charlie!” he complained.

Charlie just grinned at him as the other poets’ laughter echoed down the hallway. Knox shrugged him off, but Charlie wrestled his way back onto his shoulder. Neil barely registered any of it—he was too busy chasing the air back into his lungs, unknitting the coils in his chest, finding the feeling he’d lost from his legs.

He couldn’t believe it. She was glad he’d called, she’d wanted to run lines with him, he was going to see her on Sunday!

Neil’s heart fluttered. Things were good—no, things were *perfect*. This was everything that he’d wanted. *This* would fix him.

And if there was even a single, miniscule pinprick of doubt, stabbing traitorously in his heart, Neil resolved to ignore it. He was happy. He was *happy*. He was going to see Ginny and he was happy.

And nothing else.

It was as simple as that.

Chapter End Notes

haha what a silly guy

also fun fact i did write a poem for knox. but. it really didn't make sense to include in the chapter. so. idk

and I swear its just about autumn leaves nothing else there's nothing else to read into there is no subtext the curtains are just blue thats it nothing else

Our Love Is Meant To Be Shared

Chapter Summary

Neil has a lovely, *mostly* Todd-free visit over with Ginny.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Give it a *rest*, Charlie,” Neil begged.

“But Neil!”

“I’m not taking them.”

“Do you want to impress her or not?”

Neil shifted his gaze between the pair that had, only a few minutes prior, unceremoniously barged into his room and demanded his attention for their *urgent* request. He shook his head; of course it hadn’t actually been all that important, in the end. Neil turned his attention back to fixing his hair—thankfully without the aid of Charlie’s slimy gel this time around, using only his hands and the comb he was currently running through his fringe. As he did, he caught the two boys staring at him in the dusty reflection, affronted.

“You know, Knox and I spent all morning picking them,” Charlie’s reflection whined. “And you’re not even going to think about it. You’re cruel, you are.”

“Don’t say *that*,” Knox’s reflection chided, elbowing mirrored Charlie in his left side. (Right side?) “What he’s *trying* to say is that if you really wanted to show her what she means to you, then you should

bring a gift."

Neil carefully pulled one tuft of hair across his forehead. He frowned, picking at it until it came undone again, tucking it behind his ear. Which was better, but still not perfect. He hummed, fighting at the nerves in his stomach and the nausea climbing up his oesophagus. Charlie's reflection made a great show of sighing, loudly and exasperatedly, as he walked towards Neil's roommate's bed.

"Don't," Neil warned. "If you get dirt from your shoes on it, I'll never hear the end of it."

"Ugh, *fine*. I won't put up my shoes, then."

Neil watched as Knox's reflection stopped him. "And your fingers? What about those?"

"Don't *fink* on me, Knoxious—" Charlie whispered sharply.

Neil spun around, studying Charlie as he hovered threateningly close to the pristine, grey bedsheets. "Show me your fingers, Charlie," he demanded.

Charlie placed his hands behind his back, obscuring them from Neil's view—like a child caught holding something they shouldn't. Neil closed the gap between him and the boy, snatching at Charlie's wrists before he could fully conceal them. It was as Neil had suspected; Charlie's hands were *criminally* filthy (and not just in the metaphorical sense). There was earth crusted onto his knuckles, the lines snaking across his palm were almost entirely brown, and there was enough dirt clogged under his nails to fill a dozen mole hills in with.

“What?” Charlie asked, indignant. “*You* try digging around the Welton gardens all morning. See how clean *your* hands are after that.”

“You took them from the *gardens*, Charlie?” Neil breathed long and slow out of his nostrils, a fruitless attempt to calm his own breathing. He would’ve pinched his brow, but even Charlie’s wrists had had soil clinging to them; Neil’s hands came away from the sleeves pocked with crumbling brown, and he had to restrain himself from reaching up to his face—lest he end up dirtying that, too.

“I think you’ll find that *we* took them from the gardens, thank you very much,” Charlie corrected, pulling his grubby hands away from Neil and shoving them carelessly into his pockets—eliciting a wince from the other two boys in the room, apparently the only ones present with any respect for cleanliness. “And if any of the teachers ask, let the records show— It was Knox’s idea in the first place.”

“Hey!” Knox barked, holding up his notably clean hands in his defence. With them, he raised up the small—but deceptively dense—bouquet of short-stemmed, purple flowers clasped in his grasp, fingers wrinkling against the wax paper they were wrapped in. The whole thing was bound in twine, as it had been when it had first been presented to Neil—alongside the scheme of bringing them along with him on his visit to the Danburry’s.

Charlie waggled a stained finger at Knox. “It was! Don’t deny it!”

“When I said to get flowers, I didn’t mean steal them from the gardens!” Knox groaned.

Charlie cocked his head to the side. “Well, where were we *supposed* to get them from, Overstreet?”

“The florist!” Knox yelled. “And helping Neil was your idea, so—”

“Would you both be quiet?” Neil snapped, a little louder and sharper than he’d meant. His nerves were boiling his brain like a fever, the nausea was making the room spin, and he couldn’t *think* with the two boys bickering in his room. His growling was effective, at least, halting both boys in their tracks. “I— Look.” Neil tried swallowing back some of the acid seeping into his mouth. “It was very nice of you two to bring the flowers, thank you, but… I just don’t think it’s the right thing to do— Not yet, anyway. Okay?”

Charlie and Knox both straightened themselves. Charlie even took a few exaggerated steps away from the bed he so clearly desperately wanted to lounge across, exchanging an abashed look with Knox as he did so, and the two seemed to reach an understanding. They both nodded, and Charlie cleared his throat.

“Sorry, Neil. We’ll both leave you be, now.” He threw an arm over Knox’s shoulder, something that Neil had noticed was becoming a more common occurrence each day—why Knox always seemed so surprised by it, every time, he couldn’t hope to guess. “Come on, Knoxious. Let’s get those flowers into some water.” He waved to Neil as he marched himself and Knox through the door. “And good luck with your date!” he called from beyond the doorframe.

“G-Good luck, Neil!” Knox managed to say, before he was promptly yanked out of view by Charlie.

“Not a date,” Neil mumbled, to no one, turning back to his wardrobe door. And the mirror, hung inside it. And his own, ragged face, hung inside *that*. He sighed. He really shouldn’t have taken his fretfulness out on Charlie and Knox—it wasn’t fair to them, they’d only been trying to help.

It was just that, sometimes, it didn't *feel* that way. It seemed Charlie was only throwing himself into this plot for the sake of plotting, and Knox… Neil didn't know why, but he felt as if Knox was merely waiting for something. Waiting for something Neil would *do*, or *say,* or *realise*—as for why that required him to conspire with Charlie to assist Neil on his not-date, Neil had no clue.

Didn't they trust what he was doing?

Did *he* trust what he was doing?

Neil buried his hands in his hair and raked them through swiftly, *violently*, unrooting all of the neatly laid locks and undoing all of the work of the past ten minutes. Not to mention that the dirt that Charlie had tracked in, spread to Neil's fingers when he'd clocked the boy's wrist, was now completely sifted in with the mess he'd made of his head. He grabbed the comb off of his bed, where he'd deposited it earlier, and began furiously peeling it through his hair.

He just had to get this *one thing* right—

Why was it so damn *difficult*?

Neil couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu slinking up his back as he approached the Danburry household once more, hearing his footsteps clack on the paved steps and rapping his knuckles against the whitewashed wood grain of the door. Every sensation, every sound, and every action was both familiar and yet dissimilar, whipping up Neil's nerves even worse than before. This time, thankfully, he didn't have Dr. Hager in tow—he'd ridden his bike here, as if it were one of the rehearsals for the play. (A statement which, Neil thought with a manic amusement, wasn't entirely incorrect.)

Neil was trying his best to ball up the frantic energy whirring within him—nerves, excitement, then nerves again—when the door swung open. Familiar yet dissimilar. And behind it was…

…oh. Neil had to bite his tongue to keep back laughter.

"Hello, I'm here to see Ginny?" he managed, extending his hand. He couldn't help but smile as he followed with, "Chet Danburry, isn't it?"

Neil was certain he was correct this time. He *was*. One-hundred-percent, as sure as he was that the sky was blue; and that the grass was green; and that if you pinched Meeks on the cheek, Pitts would be able to feel phantom pain in the exact same spot, even removed halfway across the country from the boy.

Because how could he have possibly mistaken anyone for *this* guy?

Chet looked exactly as Neil couldn't remember him; dark eyes that were not so much deep as they were *blank*, black-brown hair that was cropped short around the sides and front, the most punchable mug that Neil had yet witnessed in his short life on this good earth. In his time away from Welton, Chet had grown an extra foot in height, and only slightly less than that in breadth—on top of developing a stubble that was on the cusp of needing another shave. From what precious little Neil could recall of the boy from Welton, he seemed to have completely transformed, keeping only the hair colour, eye colour, and… *intriguing* personality, if Adam's tales were to be trusted.

Oh, and the underbite. Neil had forgotten about the underbite. A memory, bubbling up sudden and unheeded, emerged of how Cameron had once described Chet, back when the study group was newly formed. What was the phrase he'd used? Yes, that was it

—‘positively *Neanderthalic*’. The comment had sent the study group into fits of laughter, and earned Cameron a grateful look from Knox. And Neil had to admit, looking at Chet now, letterman jacket pulled over his frame, leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed and eyes narrowed…

Neil felt a little bad for him, actually.

The feeling lasted up until Chet grabbed Neil’s hand and practically tore it from his wrist, shouting over his shoulder, “Ginny! Your *other* weird friend is here!”

God, how Neil had ever mistaken Todd for this absolute *character* was beyond him—it must’ve been something in the hair gel, he reasoned, some chemical sinking into Neil’s scalp and cutting off any and all higher brain function. Todd was smart, gentle, caring; he was everything—every positive trait that wouldn’t approach Chet with a ten foot pole. Todd was…

Not something he was supposed to be thinking about, he reminded himself, bitterly. Neil scolded his misbehaving mind as Chet dropped the handshake with a disinterested roll of his shoulders, soft footsteps pattering down the stairs behind him.

“Neil! Hi!” Ginny chimed from behind her brother, who stepped aside to allow Neil entry—his eyes following Neil all the way in. He seemed to have a particular interest in Neil’s uniform, especially all of the clinking badges with ‘Welton’ emblazoned so brazenly on their polished metals.

“Hey, Nick?” Chet called, as Ginny began to pull Neil upstairs.

“Neil,” he replied.

“It’s Chet, actually, but hey— Do you know a guy named *Knox* at your school, Nick?”

Neil paused where he was on the step, leg half raised.

“Yes, I do…” he answered, carefully.

“Can you ask him something for me?”

“Uh…” Neil looked towards Ginny, who was only rolling her eyes. She nodded upstairs impatiently, obviously eager to be away from her brother. “…sure?”

Chet grinned, flashing his teeth tauntingly. It reminded Neil of a shark. “Can you ask him if he’s still afraid of ghosts?”

“Oh, knock it off, Chet,” Ginny chided, pulling Neil the rest of the way up the flight.

Chet laughed. “Nice to meet you, Nick!”

“L-Likewise…?” Neil didn’t bother to correct him—on the name, or on the fact that they’d *technically* met on the Welton soccer field several years ago. Mostly because correcting Chet involved having to talk to him again.

Which Neil did not want to do.

“Don’t pay him any mind,” Ginny commented. “He’s just gotten back from practice—his head’s a little bumped.”

“I heard that!”

“Come on.” Ginny led him into the upstairs hallway, unexplored territory for Neil. As he took in his new surroundings, following his guide as she skipped towards the door at the far end, he mentally jotted down *not* to tell Knox about his most recent exchange with Chet. Knox really didn’t need that sort of negativity back in his life, and Charlie certainly didn’t need any new fuel to torment Knox with.

Though Knox has been oddly happy the past few weeks, Neil thought. *And Charlie has been going easier on him, as well.* Ever since the two seemed to have decided it was their joint goal—their very own project, like Meeks and Pitts’ radio—to assist Neil in winning over Ginny, Neil had noticed the two grow closer. He had seen them talking more both between and in class; spending more of their free time in each other’s company; and, as of late, bickering more often over increasingly trivial topics. Such as Knox’s poem that he’d read out for English, or Charlie’s newfound insistence on performing everything left-handed. Or whose idea it was to poach flowers from the Welton gardens, before Neil had put a loud and proper end to *that* discussion.

He still needed to apologise to them for that… *that’s* what he’d give Knox when he returned to Welton. Not some reminder about his troubled past with some bully he detested—an apology.

“This is my room,” Ginny said, motioning to a door at the very end of the corridor. “Before we go in, I should mention—” But Neil had already pushed the doorway open, ready to forgive any messy floors or unmade beds (as if he would fare any better, without the looming threat of a room inspection).

It turns out, none of that was the issue. Ginny's room was not only remarkably tidy, but it was also downright lovely—the wallpaper was stripes filled with rows of orange roses, the bed had a peach frill skirting around its legs, and sunlight poured out of a bay window onto a cushioned seat shelved beneath. It almost made Neil sad to have his house so far from Welton, until he remembered that would then involve spending the majority of his day with his father. Even the thought of that made him shiver—so instead of disheartening himself further, he focused his thoughts solely on Ginny's bright décor.

Which is where Neil discovered what the issue had *actually* been.

The issue in question was laid luxuriously across the bay window seat, blending in so seamlessly with the gorgeous furnishings that Neil's eyes nearly skimmed over him. He had his nose buried in a book bound in wrinkled leather, so lost to the world that he didn't even seem aware that he had visitors, his hair and face cast radiant in the afternoon glow—

Damnit. *Damnit.*

One polite cough from Ginny, and Todd's gaze flew upwards. Neil watched as the boy's calm demeanour gave way to a flustered sort of surprise, as he shut his book closed and stood quickly. Déjà vu, yet again—Neil felt as if he were intruding on something between the two, and it was making him just as sick as it had the first time.

"Hey, Todd," Ginny said, feather-soft with her words. She skipped around the bed and then sat herself down upon it, creaking the mattress as she faced him. "Neil and I are just going to run some lines for the play, is that alright?"

Todd looked up at Ginny, and then over to Neil who had, so far, stayed still as a statue by the doorframe. For the love of all things holy, all the angels in the heavens above and every single sinner rotting below—the boy saw Neil and *smiled* at him, goddamn *smiled* at him. Neil returned with a steeled nod, grinding his teeth together as he begged his heart to slow its beating. He dipped his eyes down to the floorboards, only to inspect if their colouring matched the rest of the room. *Not* to dodge whatever reaction his own had elicited from Todd, he didn't *care* what it was, he didn't give a damn about any of it —

"I-It's alright," Neil heard Todd stammer back. If his brain was feeling particularly mutinous, he would've noted that Todd's voice sounded… disappointed. "I-I'll j-just go read in the l-living room."

Neil heard Todd's footsteps approaching the door—the door Neil was so unhelpfully obstructing, because *of course he was*. He quickly rectified this by pressing himself flat against the wall. Not flat enough, evidently, as Neil felt the cool slip of leather and the heady smell of ink skitter past him, brushing against his knuckles. He continued to eye the floor as the footsteps echoed down the hallway, down the stairs, out of earshot. Neil breathed a sigh of relief as a shiver ran down his spine.

Thank goodness, Neil thought. He couldn't imagine how he'd be able to focus with Todd in the room, words reflected in his eyes and sunlight threading his hair with gold—

Stop thinking about him! Neil chastised himself. *You're here for Ginny, not him!*

Finally able to look up, he saw Ginny kicking her legs on her bed, fussing with the drawer of her nightstand. He made his way over—she likely hadn't even witnessed any of that awkward interaction, another thing for Neil to be grateful for.

“Sorry, I was trying to say before…” Ginny started, but Neil cut her off with a raised hand.

“No, no, it’s all alright,” he assured her. (If Ginny could see the clench in his jaw when he spat the words out, she didn’t mention it.) “I’m guessing he spends a lot of time around here?” he asked, as he settled into the chair Ginny drew up opposite her.

She nodded. “He’s over here more often than not.” She giggled, fondly. Neil ignored how ill it made him feel. “Sometimes I’ll come back from wherever to find him by the window, or on a couch.”

Neil felt his face heat up—the way she described it, it was all so *domestic*. It was sweet, really (if only in the *sickly* sense of the word). “And your parents don’t mind?” Neil asked, voice clipped.

Ginny smiled, sitting back on her haunches on the bed. “Of course not. They both think he’s just wonderful—apparently, once, my father pulled him aside and told him that he’s *always welcome in this house*. That was after…” Ginny stopped, stiffening on the flowing, rose-printed sheets. She took a sharp breath in. “Well,” she continued, “I’m sure my father will say the same to you eventually—he quite likes you, from what I’ve heard.”

Hm. Neil had always thought Mr. Danburry a little odd, ever since Neil’s first visit—what, with his confusing antics of asking Neil how his day was and then seeming genuinely invested in Neil’s answer. He’d come to pick up Ginny from rehearsals, once, and had fiercely congratulated Neil on his pursuit of arts. Neil was sure that the man was somehow messing with him, but Ginny had ascertained that it was authentic. “*It’s just how he is*,” she had told Neil, as if it was nothing more than some irritating quirk of her father.

But that wasn't the important part of Ginny's speech. Neil bit his lip, telling himself he wouldn't ask, he *shouldn't* ask, it wouldn't do him any good to—

"Ever since what?" he asked, anyway.

"Nothing," Ginny deflected, flattening out her script in front of her on the bed. She was still smiling, but something dark passed over her face. Her voice was a little too high and a little too strained as she squeaked, "What scene shall we start with, hm?"

Neil wouldn't inquire further. He *shouldn't* inquire further. It was obviously personal—worse, personal to *Todd*, who Neil was *not* thinking about at the moment. He wouldn't speculate on what this meant for Todd, what Ginny's change of inflection indicated, or what the implications of her forcing it aside were.

Neil reached out and gently pushed shut her script. "Ginny, tell me."

Ginny looked up at Neil, eyes swimming with unease. She hesitantly sighed, and Neil saw her grip on the blankets go limp as she pulled her arms up to wrap around her torso.

"W-Well," she said, as Neil let his hand fall back to beside his chair. "I can't tell you what happened, really, but… it's to do with Todd's parents."

Neil wouldn't, *shouldn't*—

"What about his parents?"

“They… *well.*” Ginny’s tone grew bitter. “They don’t pay attention to Todd, really. All their attention is on his brother—”

“Jeffrey,” Neil recalled. “Valedictorian.” He remembered how Todd had shrivelled up when Neil had said his name, in the very first conversation they’d had—a conversation its mention had effectively ended, Neil recalled.

“Yes,” Ginny spat. “Valedictorian, team captain, Ivy League scholar… poor Todd has to live up to all that, and if he can’t…?” She scoffed, voice lowering to a rasp. “He’s worthless to them.”

Neil fussed with his hands. Eventually, he spoke. “So… he prefers to spend time here, instead.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Neil considered it. If he were to decide between the cold, cavernous Perry household, with his poor mother and his overbearing father—or the Danburry household, with its homeliness and warmth and peculiarly cheery parental figures. God, was that really the choice Todd had been given? Neil’s own familial situation wasn’t exactly comparable, he supposed, but at least in his case he wasn’t consigned to living at home throughout the whole year.

Neil’s silence was enough of an answer for Ginny. She flicked her script back open, rescuing him from his thoughts as she held it out to him, pointing at the page numbers. “This… this is one of the scenes I need help with. If you could read for, uh, Lysander, please…”

Neil swallowed, nodded, and pulled open his own script.

They read lines for an unmeasured while, playing scenes over and over until the words were stuck in their teeth and verse rolled light off their tongues. It was awkward, for the first ten minutes or so, both of them sitting rigidly as the dregs of their prior conversation clung to the air like cobwebs. But Neil spoke softly when he helped correct Ginny's mistakes, and every now and then one of them would crack a joke, and the two soon fell into a rhythm. In no time at all, they were gliding through the script like scissors through seafoam.

The light outside slowly dimmed as the sun dipped lower and lower down the bay window's frame. They both pretended they hadn't spoken about the things they'd spoken about, Neil ignoring both the depression in the seat beneath the window and the thoughts teasing at the edge of his skull about Todd and his parents—he was an actor, after all. Keeping up the façade came all too easy.

They were interrupted, eventually, by a knock at the door. For a hopeful second, Neil thought it was Todd returning—a thought he quickly squirreled away in shame as the door swung open, revealing the familiarly overenthusiastic face of one Mr. Danburry.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but your mother was worried that you and Neil might've been hungry?"

"Not particularly," Ginny answered. "You, Neil?"

Neil flashed a polite smile, ignoring the ache in his stomach. "I'm alright, thank you."

"A shame," Mr. Danburry lamented from the door. "Because I'd been

given this plate to leave with you two." With that, he produced the aforementioned plate, loaded with colourful pastries. Neil and Ginny both eyed the food, their stomachs rumbling treacherously.

"Well," Ginny relented with a grin, "it would be rude to send you back, I suppose."

"Are you sure?" Neil asked Mr. Danburry, as he waltzed in and placed the plate on Ginny's dresser.

"Oh, it's all left over from our guests this morning. Just don't get any crumbs in your bed," he told Ginny, with a wink. "Your mother will have a fit." Neil very much doubted that; Mrs. Danburry seemed as sweet as the treats piled up on the plate. Not that that meant Neil would dare spill any crumbs—if anything, it made him want to avoid any mess-making even *more*.

Ginny and Neil both thanked Mr. Danburry as he turned to leave. Neil greedily brought a pastry to his mouth, but paused before he bit into it.

"Sir?" he called out.

"Please, Neil," Mr. Danburry said, spinning back around. "I get enough formalities at work— You can just call me Joe."

"Uh, sorry," Neil stumbled. He wasn't entirely sure of what he was saying, the words sort of just… spilling out of his mouth. "I was just wondering if… maybe Todd wanted some?"

The man shook his head. "He refused them when I asked. Although…"

he went and picked up one of the smaller plates stacked atop the larger one, filling it with two pastries. “Perhaps if I tell him that you two insisted, he’d be more inclined. I’ll go see.” He smiled, and Neil could plainly see where Ginny got her congeniality from—it was all genetic. (Chet, Neil thought, must’ve been adopted.) “You two have fun!”

Once he’d exited, the pair of young actors relocated to the floor for their afternoon tea. They set aside the scripts as well, Neil joking that the pages would end up glued shut with sugar if they didn’t. Without lines to practice, their mouths were left to chew and talk—the former on the pastries (which were the best things Neil had tasted in ages), and the latter about anything and everything.

“Who were the guests your father had over earlier?” Neil inquired, swallowing a mouthful of sweetness. “Patients? Fellow doctors? Some important board members?”

Ginny chuckled. “No, no… nothing like that! It was some of his old friends, from his time at Welton.”

Neil couldn’t help but be a little taken aback. “Really?”

“Why not?” Ginny shrugged. “Wouldn’t you want to meet up with your friends after all those years?”

In truth, Neil hadn’t considered it; when he’d imagined his future, it’d always appeared as his father had laid it out: a doctor’s profession, days spent chasing respect and status, a faceless wife and a white picket fence. It seemed so distant, so disconnected from the life he had now, as if the two were separate worlds. He and his Welton friends resided in one, and everything his father had planned out for him resided in the other. At some unspecified point in time, he’d move from one to the next, and that would be it.

He tried picturing it, though; in twenty years or so, inviting any or all of the poets over for a Sunday morning, catching up and sharing stories of how their different lives had gone. It'd be like one of their old cave meetings, everyone cozy and comfortable and content to just *be*. He described it to Ginny, trying to capture how it made warmth spread across his chest.

"Oh, Neil, that's lovely!" she replied.

Neil flushed. "What about you?" he asked.

"I'd also love to keep in touch with my friends if I could," Ginny confessed, sprawled across the floor and picking crumbs out of her skirt. "I'd have Chris over, and we could go out to the bakery, like we used to do after school sometimes… of course, if things are going Chet's way, he'll be married to her by then…"

"Would you be married by then, too, do you think?" Neil asked. It seemed so natural a question to follow up with, Neil didn't realise how it sounded before he heard Ginny's chewing cease.

Ginny covered her mouth with her hand, the dimples on her cheeks betraying that she was smiling. The blush was even more telling.

"I would like to…" she murmured through her fingers. "But to who, though?"

Neil joined her in lying down, rolling onto his back. He stared up at the dusty, white ceiling. He knew the answer to that question. A feeling he now knew all too well began to build up within him, prickling in his gut at an odd angle—it was funny, almost. That the

jealousy could feel different, due to Neil being horizontal.

“Todd, most like,” Neil sighed.

Ginny’s laughter was normally a pleasant thing—it floated, delicate and dainty, fluttering in the air like butterfly wings. Neil loved to make her laugh, teasing her with jokes when they were supposed to be quiet in the wings of the theatre, forcing her to bite her tongue so that it didn’t all spill out of her. Better when it did, and the sound filled the air, much like it was doing now—*except.* It wasn’t so pleasant at the moment; the slightly breathless staccato Neil had grown accustomed to now sounded… mocking?

“Am I wrong?”

The laughter stopped. Ginny sat up, propping up her body on her outstretched arms, fixing her eyes on Neil.

“Wait. You’re being *serious*?” she asked, incredulity colouring her tone. It was not an emotion she wore regularly, which made it all the more biting.

Neil felt heat bloom on his face. It was as if he were in class, being lectured by his teacher for missing an assignment. “Are you two not…?” he said, weakly.

“No!” Ginny cried immediately, looking positively aghast. “We’re only friends!”

“Oh,” was all Neil could manage. And then, only to himself, he whispered it again. “*Oh.*”

Because, well—

Oh.

Something lifted itself off of Neil's chest. Some great weight, one which had been pressing down onto his ribcage for some time now—forcing the spiked ends of the bones to scratch at his heart and lungs. Not just a weight, Neil thought, but an *anchor*, an anchor mooring him to port no longer—the heavy, iron chain now sawed loose, leaving Neil's spirit free to soar over the surf, the sea, and the sky. He smiled up at the ceiling, at its dusty, white simplicity, resisting the urge to yawp with glee at the top of his lungs.

They're not dating.

He felt like an idiot.

They're not dating.

He felt like flying.

They're not dating, they're not dating, they're not dating…

"What possibly gave you that idea in the first place?"

Neil shrugged as best he could lying down. It came out as a slight quirk of his shoulders, a small recline of his head—he was too ecstatic

to care. “You’re both so close,” he explained. “And so… familiar with each other. The way he looks at you, smiles at you, laughs at you…” Neil let out a soft, slow exhale, like a kettle hissing out built-up steam. “You kissed him on the cheek the night I first met you both…” Neil blushed at the memory, and so did Ginny once she caught onto his tone.

“That was…!” She trailed off, slowly sinking back to the floor. After a moment, she shook her head. “That was… it’s not… it’s just… *it’s not like that.*”

Like before, they both fell silent. It wasn’t uncomfortable, though, like it had been the last time. Neil snatched another pastry off of the plate as Ginny chewed on her own. The wondrous feeling in Neil’s chest was fading, but only slightly—it remained, a soft drumbeat amidst the background noise, a voice that whispered *they’re not dating, they’re not dating, they’re not dating…*

Neil, feeling bold as ever, broke the silence. “Perhaps we should bring Todd up here and end the debate.” That earned him a half-eaten pastry thrown at him, and the two soon picked back up their old back-and-forth.

From there, conversation moved naturally from one topic to the next; like two children hopping from stone to stone over an easy-flowing river. Neil and Ginny told each other stories from their respective schools. Then they discussed the gossip infesting Everett Theatre, immediately followed by them laughing at the absurdity of it all. Then they theorised over which play Henley Hall was likely to put on next year, Neil insisting that it was going to be *Hamlet* while Ginny was set on *Much Ado About Nothing*. Throughout all of it, Neil couldn’t help but bounce his leg on the carpet, thrum his fingers against the leg of a nearby chair, hum under his breath.

Because they weren’t dating! Todd and Ginny weren’t dating! Neil couldn’t wait to tell the other poets, the excitement of it all showing

through his every thought and movement. When he spoke, he forgot to breathe between his rushed words; when he laughed, it was loud enough to echo off of the walls; when he smiled, his jaw ached from the action, tired out from repeating it so often.

Neil was so distracted, he didn't even register as it grew dark outside. He realised too late that the afternoon was slipping away from them, the hands of the clock sitting on Ginny's desk crawling further along the face than he'd thought—a little too much further, in fact.

"Oh, shit!" Neil sat up suddenly. "I was supposed to be off five minutes ago!"

"Oh!" Ginny exclaimed, checking the time and staring back at Neil guiltily. "Sorry, I didn't even notice… we got a little off track, didn't we?"

"We did, yes— But I think we did well to practice as much as we did, though." He picked his script back up off of the chair and flipped through it, fingers tracing over all the bookmarked pages that they'd rehearsed this afternoon. It was a respectable amount.

"It's a shame we didn't get to practise any of your lines, though."

"Well," Neil mused, "I suppose we'll just have to do this again sometime."

Ginny smiled. "I guess we will."

Neil said his hurried goodbyes to Ginny in her room before clambering out into the upstairs hallway. He caught Mrs. Danburry

there, where he was able to quickly thank her for the pastries before descending the stairs with a slight kick to his step. His hand had only just reached out towards the shining brass of the knob of the front door, when suddenly he stayed it.

A sound caught his attention. There was some soft rustle of cutlery in the kitchen, the whispering crackle of the fire, but above it all—the near-inaudible scuff of skin against paper as a page was turned. Neil lingered in the lobby, fighting his body, which seemed determined to inspect the noise. Before he could help himself, he took a few steps backwards and leaned his head over—sneaking a single peek back into the living room.

Todd was where Neil had expected him to be—on the floor, where he and Ginny had been studying when Neil was over last, nose back to being buried into his book. Neil noticed with a leap of his heart that there was an empty plate beside him, colourful crumbs scattered atop its patterned surface. He longed to call out, to say a quick goodbye, perhaps even apologise for being so cold earlier. But—

But he *couldn't*. The realisation hit him like freezing lake-water—he *couldn't*.

Because things were going so well. He'd had a fantastic time running lines with Ginny, the pastries had been delicious, and most spectacularly of all, he'd been dead *wrong*. Todd and Ginny were, most certainly, *not* an item.

Which meant he had to leave before he inevitably ruined it, like he had ruined it the last time.

Neil knew talking to Todd was dangerous game. Neil knew what the boy did to him, what he'd done to him already, what kind of odd and exhilarating thoughts took hold in his mind if he allowed them to

form. It only took looking at the boy to make Neil melt, to make him crumble, to make him—

Todd's head perked up, making to turn around, and—

Neil yanked himself away from his view of the living room, shaking. God, what was *wrong* with him? Why couldn't he just let himself be happy? Why did everything always have to come back to *him*?

Not anymore, Neil promised himself, wrenching open the front door with a twist of his hand and fleeing out into the approaching night; he left the boy in the living room to read his book, to dream up poetry in his mind, to be slowly forgotten about by Neil.

It's for the best.

Neil hopped on his bike and practically flew back to Welton, the crisp cold cutting clean his thoughts. He was happy, happier than he'd ever been—*really*, he was—and he wasn't about to let his ludicrous thoughts about one ludicrous boy get in the way of *this*, was he? He sped through the wrought-iron gates of Welton, wheeling his bike through the pathways winding around the school's gardens. He stared up at the now twilit sky, where stars were beginning to shine through pinpricks in the purpling filament.

Honestly.

Why ruin his happiness because of one boy?

You know why, said some small voice in the back of his mind. He stalled for a second, swivelling his head as if someone was about to

jump out of the shadowy foliage surrounding him. Neil huffed, and quickened his pace towards the door leading inside, stuffing his doubt back into the corners of his mind. He left all thoughts of Todd outside with his bike, underneath the gloam and the waning moon—as he hurried through the halls, he forced his mind back on his not-date with Ginny. On every part of it which was perfect, every part of it which went flawlessly, every part of it that he would need to relay back to the poets in excruciating detail, over and over.

Just outside the common room, he took a deep breath, holding his frenzied heart steady. Then he burst in through the doors, ready to sing the good news to all that would listen.

Chapter End Notes

chapter title from 'Echo' and whoops sunday upload. this chapter was NOT cooperating

also i didn't mean to roast chet it just kinda happened, no hate on his actor

as always, thanks for reading! and if you kudos or comment i love you forever. no pressure tho

While Our Love Goes Nowhere

Chapter Summary

Neil makes a promise he ends up being unable to keep. Things go downhill from there.

Chapter Notes

or, alternatively, Neil's no good, very bad day

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“They’re not dating!” Neil exclaimed.

“Yes, Neil, we’re all aware,” Charlie sighed, woefully unimpressed.

“But *Charlie*,” Neil soldiered on, “do you know what this *means*?”

In response, the other boy only rolled his eyes, arms crossed as he leant against the dull brick behind him. Which was… okay, *fair*. Neil might have been a *little* too enthusiastic in his sharing of the news of Todd and Ginny’s relationship—mostly of how delightfully *platonic* it was. And maybe Neil had gone on and on about it a few too many times since his not-date on Sunday, brought it up a few too many instances in a few too many unrelated conversations, but he couldn’t help it. He was *happy*.

“Mr. Perry!” Mr. Keating called out from across the courtyard. “Your walk bears a striking resemblance to that of Mr. Dalton’s!”

“Sorry Captain!” Neil called back, beginning to move again—the objective of today’s lesson was, ostensibly, to find one’s own, personalised way of walking. Something easier said than done when one had twenty other boys all trying to be unique as well, all whilst an impressively eagle-eyed English teacher watched to ensure no two had

(independently or no) selected the same style of strut.

Neil chose a walk with long, swooping steps, and chose to perform it circling around the pillar that Charlie was "exercising his right not to walk" against. It was a touch dizzying, spinning in the other boy's orbit, but it did allow him to continue on with the conversation.

"Charlie," he started again. "Do you know what this *means*?"

"That you're terrible at reading people?" Charlie deadpanned.

"Hey!"

"What? It's true." Charlie shrugged. "But, if I *were* to play along— No, Neil, I have no clue what it means. Explain it to poor, stupid old me."

"Well, if you insist," Neil relented, with faux reluctance, slowing his pace as he stepped closer to Charlie.

His friend was in a mood—that much was plain—but it wasn't enough to deter Neil. He hadn't felt this golden since he'd gotten his part as Puck, and it showed through with how he was bursting at the seams with excitement. *Had been* bursting at the seams from excitement, for what was nearing forty-eight hours.

"It means I can… you know!" Neil gestured with his hands as best as he could—the movement held no specific meaning, simply acting as a way for Neil to convey his joy.

“Descriptive,” Charlie drawled. “Well, as loathe as I am to hear the news for the hundredth time… I’ll say yet again, for the hundredth time, I’m happy for you, Neil.”

“*We’re* happy for you,” butted in Knox, who had sauntered over with a wide angle between his legs. “Seriously, Neil, it’s *great* news.”

Neil beamed. “Thanks, Knox.”

“Yes, yes,” Charlie muttered. “Nothing’s changed from the first time he said it, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. Neil, are you sure that *you* know what this means?”

“Hm?” Neil had entered some strange dance with Knox, travelling with the boy in a figure eight pattern on the ground, both in their own respective gaits. “What do you mean?”

“You… *do* know what you have to do now, right?”

“Of course I do,” Neil hummed as he circled around Knox, caught in the other boy’s gravity. “It’s… *erm*…”

Charlie, once again, rolled his eyes. “Ask her on a date, you idiot!”

“Oh.” Neil felt his steps slow as his heartbeat quickened, jumping up his throat. He lost the pattern his feet were tracing on the ground. “I… I mean, I *will*,” he said, if a little hesitantly.

Charlie caught onto this hesitation at once. “Don’t tell me you’re going

to chicken out of it now, are you?" he jeered.

"I just haven't given it that much thought, Dalton," Neil replied. He picked up his stride again, ignoring the smirking boy against the pillar. "I mean, it's only been a couple days. That doesn't mean it's never going to happen." He lifted his face to find Knox's, to see if he would rejoin him in the dance they had going. But Knox had stopped, staring at him, mouth set to the side and head listing ever-so-slightly to the left.

Knox had, surprisingly, been the quietest of the poets when Neil had first shared the news that night. Despite how much he had pushed himself into helping Neil (alongside Charlie, of course) Knox had only given Neil a few congratulatory pats on the back before wandering back to his room. Unlike Charlie, who had celebrated obnoxiously loudly—sure, Charlie was well sick to death of Neil's repetitive speech *now*, but Sunday night he'd yawped with enough volume to wake the dead.

"You really should, Neil," Knox agreed, catching Neil's eye. "If that's what you want," he added coolly.

Neil's throat constricted, and he almost felt himself trip over his own wide, sweeping steps. What was Knox implying? Had he heard all of the doubt replaying in Neil's mind on his ride back to Welton that night? If not, then why say that?

"Of course that's what he wants," Charlie reaffirmed. "And careful, *Mr. Overstreet*," he warned, making a motion towards Knox's lack thereof. "Don't let the Captain catch you copying off of my work."

Knox shook his head, shooting Neil a soft smile. "Right, right." Then he resumed walking, this time steering away from Neil and Charlie. Neil studied him as he meandered away, over towards where Meeks

was shambling around like a robot and Pitts was… on all fours? Neil squinted at the head of brown hair bobbing away; what had Knox meant? Why was he acting so strange? What did it have to do with Neil asking out Ginny?

"Still driven by that deeper force," Charlie commented.

Neil thought for a second that Charlie was referring to him, but then caught the boy's gaze locked onto Knox and his cowboy strut. Neil followed Charlie's focus, noting how it dipped to follow the pitching forward of Knox's waist that Mr. Keating had pointed out after he'd first had Knox, Cameron, and Pitts demonstrate the effects of conformity. Neil laughed.

"Certainly is," Neil agreed.

"He's in love too, you know."

Charlie's bluntness, being the stuff of legend, was something that Neil certainly should've been well accustomed to at this point—especially considering how long the two had been friends. But the Dalton himself was nothing if not full of surprises, and so the directness punched the breath out of Neil just as it would've years ago.

"Oh…" Neil managed. "Really?"

Charlie nodded, bundling his hands tighter around himself as he made a face. "Disgustingly so."

"You sound… very certain," Neil observed.

“I’m absolutely certain, Perry,” Charlie insisted, oddly mirthlessly.

Neil quirked up his eyebrow. “How can you be so sure?”

“Oh, please.” Charlie scoffed. “It’s written all over Overstreet’s *everything*. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed it?”

Neil thought on Knox’s peculiar behaviour. Could it truly be because of… this?

“Noticed what?”

“That he can’t get through a single class without staring dreamily out of the window. That’s he’s distracted all the time. And did you hear his poem? We know who yours was about, but his…”

Oh. So not what Neil had noticed, then. “I… wasn’t aware of any of that, no,” he replied. “Although… you two have been spending more time together these past few weeks.”

“And you should be damn grateful that we have,” Charlie snapped. “We’ve been hatching up plans to help you with your Ginny Danburry venture.”

“I know,” Neil said, holding up hands. “I know. Thanks, by the way.”

Charlie huffed. “Whatever.”

Neil fiddled with his hands. He was used to the moods Charlie usually dug himself into… this wasn't one of them. He sounded so… *resigned*. Which was worrying—Neil had never known Charlie to be one to back down from a fight.

"Well," Neil tried, "if anyone were to be able to figure it out, it'd be you, Charlie."

"You'd *think* so," Charlie spat out, a bitter edge to his voice. "But I still haven't got a clue who the girl is." Charlie looked up at Neil. "Do you have any idea…?"

"No, sorry."

Charlie only sighed, leaning his head back against the brickwork.

"He's not normally this coy about his crushes," Neil commented.

"Eh, it's probably just some Henley girl he met in town," Charlie joked, though all the humour had been drained from his words. "Some girl he'd seen once, and then become obsessed with since…"

Charlie was cut off as Mr. Keating yelled above the clamour in the courtyard, calling for all the students to gather up once more. Neil came to a stop, caught his breath, as Charlie kicked himself off of his pillar—clasping Neil on the shoulder as he stood beside him.

"Can you promise me something, Perry?"

Neil straightened himself, confused. Charlie only stared, determinedly. “Depends on what it is.”

“It’s simple,” Charlie explained, face half a smile and half a frown. “You’ve got to ask Ginny out as soon as possible. The next rehearsal, maybe—*promise* me you will. Because otherwise…” His gaze drifted off towards where the rest of the poets had gathered near Keating, where Knox was blank-faced as Cameron gesticulated wildly next to him. “…otherwise, she’s going to go off and find some other boy to be in love with. Okay?”

“Okay,” Neil answered, pushing off Charlie’s hand. He swallowed. It wasn’t what he was planning on doing, but he knew Charlie was right. Neil didn’t have forever. “I promise. Next rehearsal.”

Charlie nodded, trying for a grin.

Neil grinned back and, trying to lighten the mood, said, “Should I pick some more flowers from the gardens tomorrow, or…?”

Charlie looked thrown for a second, but then he laughed. “I wouldn’t worry about that,” he said as he walked away, chucking a wink over his shoulder as he did. And then he was over with the rest of the class, listening to their teacher warn them against conformity, and Neil took a moment to consider what he’d just promised.

Neil would ask out Ginny.

At the next rehearsals.

He could do it.

He could do it.

Carpe Diem, he thought, as he raced over. What could possibly go wrong?

The first thing to go wrong was *not* Neil's fault.

It wasn't.

He did everything correctly up until that point: he showed up to rehearsals not only on time, but with several minutes to spare; he didn't jump at Ginny as soon as she arrived, didn't immediately break off from his chat with Mary and Oliver (the boy who played Lysander) to crowd her; instead he waited, as blasé as he could be, approaching her only a bit after rehearsals had officially began—simply pulling her aside, singing out a small greeting (not literally, of course), and informing her that Neil had… *something* he wanted to tell her after rehearsals.

"*Something*?" Ginny echoed back, giggling a little. "Something you can't tell me now, because…?"

"Wouldn't want to ruin it," Neil replied.

Ginny smiled, fondly. "I *suppose* I could wait until the end of rehearsals," she droned, looking Neil up and down. "If I *must*."

“It’ll be worth it,” Neil promised, grinning.

Then they both were called to their respective places, directed off to opposite sides of the stage, but Neil didn’t mind. In fact, his entire body was lit up with anticipation, a hop to his step as he danced over to the wing of the theatre. Everything was going so *smoothly*.

“What’s the occasion?” Adam asked, glancing up from his script to see Neil’s elated expression.

“Nothing,” Neil hummed in response. He went over to the curtain and pulled it aside, as if he would be able to see past the gloom and into the other wing.

“Sure, *nothing*,” Adam laughed, before going back to his script.

Neil didn’t have another scene to play for a short while—Ginny *did*, however, which was the reason why he stayed there, peeking onto the spotlit scenery. Neil didn’t need to wait long, either, as at this point rehearsals were a process all the actors were becoming used to—one call from the stage directors and everyone jumped into action, characters stepping out onto the stage and playing from wherever they’d left off last time.

Neil watched, with bated breath and a skipping heart, as Ginny wandered onto stage to perform—alongside Mary and Oliver, of course, but Neil wasn’t really focused on them. Ginny recited her lines with a new confidence, and Neil felt a sick twist of pride when he realised that it was likely due to their extra practice on Sunday. It wasn’t as if she’d been struggling before, but her words were now notably clearer, something Neil had tried to talk her through when they’d run through the scene at her house.

“Ginny did really well,” Adam whispered from behind Neil, once the lights had dimmed. “First time she’s performed that last soliloquy without ol’ one-an-two harping on her.” *One-and-two* was what Adam had taken to calling the pair of stage directors—Neil didn’t necessarily approve of the name, but he’d accidentally used it too many times himself to meaningfully object.

“Yes,” Neil agreed. And then, because he couldn’t help himself, he added, “We ran lines over the weekend. I think it helped.”

“Did you, now?” Adam asked. “Seems to have paid off, then.”

“Certainly seems so, yes.”

“Well, we’ll be on next,” Adam said, as the mechanicals began to pile onstage. “You’ve got your script, right?”

“Yes, yes,” Neil fussed. He pranced over to his bag, pulling open the satchel and pilfering through its contents. His bag was almost always practically empty—all Neil took to rehearsals was his script, a stowed away sandwich or apple, and the occasional schoolwork that he’d forgotten to empty out before hopping on his bike. But he’d forgone the snack today, and had made sure to extract all of his notebooks and worksheets, so *theoretically* all that was in there was his script.

So imagine his surprise when he felt his fingers grasping something that was most certainly *not* the papered edge of his script booklet. He felt around further, brow furrowing, finding a solid grip around the strange object until he produced it from his bag. He laughed when he saw it—he really should’ve expected this.

“What’s that?” Adam asked, walking over, staring at the object within Neil’s hands.

“A gift from my friends, I think.” Neil answered.

He had been suspicious of how Charlie had acted that afternoon, constantly snooping around outside Neil’s room—and yet adamantly dodging any of his questions about it. Knox hadn’t been any better, insisting he’d left something in Neil’s *wardrobe*, of all places, pushing past his confused friend so that he could enter. So something like this, really, was inevitable.

Still.

Neil wasn’t able to help the grin on his face as he turned the bouquet of purple flowers over in his hand, crinkling the wax paper that had been oh-so lovingly wrapped around it. There was a new bow of twine tied on it, but the flowers themselves were obviously the same jilted bunch from Sunday morning. A tag hung off the string holding the whole package together, but Neil couldn’t make out the dark lettering against the dark background in the dark backstage.

Adam whistled. “Nice flowers.”

“Thanks,” Neil replied, stuffing them—carefully—back into his bag, fetching out the script soon after, continuing on with the usual rigmarole of rehearsals.

Things went sideways approximately half an hour later.

It happened when Ginny was scurrying off stage, following another

successful scene that she'd thoroughly studied through with Neil on Sunday. It was at the edge of the stage that, yet again, the lack of light proved to be a problem. Ginny's foot caught on a prop that had been left abandoned from the scene prior—the *donkey head*, of all things—and she tumbled to the ground. When she tried to stand up again, she couldn't do so without yelping in pain.

"You think she'll be alright?" Mary asked, as she, Adam and Neil watched Ginny be helped into the car by none other than Chet himself.

"I'm sure she will be," Adam said.

Neil remained quiet, chewing on his lip. He knew Adam had the right of it—one lousy sprained ankle wouldn't be enough to keep Ginny down for long. She had an impressive resolve, despite her appearances, and had looked more irritated than anything when Neil and Adam had had to help her limp out of the theatre. In fact, looking at her now—clouting her brother on the ear when he complained too loudly about being forced to drive out and pick her up—it seemed to Neil that bodily harm only made her come out of her shell *more*.

It was a shame that it so totally prevented Neil from asking her anything after rehearsals. It was rotten luck, really, and Neil was *not* looking forward to explaining it to Charlie. But it's not like he was able to control the situation, and his friends would understand.

The same could not be said about the *second* thing to go wrong.

It happened after the call signalling the end of rehearsals. Neil made his way to the lobby of the theatre as around him scripts were stashed away, props were placed back in drawers, and scenery was wheeled offstage—he normally hung around for a while, kicking around long after the official dismissal, but that was when he'd had someone to

kick around *with*. Additionally, he was not a little bit sour on how his plans had been foiled; true, it was no one's fault except that of the fates, but that was barely worth considering a comfort.

Even still, with a fouled mood and no reason to stay, Neil was reluctant to leave. He loitered in the lobby as his fellow actors filtered out around him, small waves or nods of goodbye shot his way every now and then. It was most likely force of habit, more than anything, that kept him from barrelling out of the front double doors—either that, or it was him not wanting to contend with how cold he knew it would be outside just yet.

Either way, it was because of Neil's loitering that he eventually came face-to-face with an abashed-looking Adam, sneaking out of the theatre proper. The boy startled when he spotted Neil in the now sparsely populated lobby, as if he'd been caught doing something illegal.

"Neil! Hi!" Adam blurted. "You're… still here!"

"Hey," Neil replied, curiously. "I… am."

"Cool." Adam pulled at the bag strap on his shoulder, tightening it against his frame. "*Cool*."

"Why… are *you* still here?" Neil asked, voice carefully schooled. He wasn't irritated (not at Adam, at least) but his words were tense from his bitter mood, and Adam was already looking a little whipped—Neil didn't want to compound that.

"I was just…" Adam began to explain, but his sentence fell with his face before he could finish—voice and plastered-on smile both slipping away from him. He sighed frustratedly, coyly placed a hand

at the back of his neck, and tried again. “I was getting a talking-to from ol’ one-and-two,” he admitted. “They’re both not happy with how I keep forgetting lines. Or swapping around lines on accident. Or inventing new lines when I forget the old ones.”

“Oh.” Neil tried for a grin. “Well, if it makes you feel any better… I think that ‘*loving-what-I-kiss*’ is a *much* better name for a flower than ‘*love-in-idleness*’. Makes more sense, too.”

Adam’s face softened slightly, the edges of his lips curling. “Thanks. If you could tell the directors that, that’d be swell.” His face darkened again. “It wouldn’t change the fact that I can’t remember any of my lines, though.”

Neil studied the boy’s frown. “Why don’t you practice with someone?” he suggested, trying to sound reassuring. “Worked well for Ginny— I mean, we only did it once, but *still*. It’ll become easier the more you do it.”

“Would that I could,” Adam lamented, sad smile playing on his lips—which, Neil thought, was worse than the frown. “I think I might’ve mentioned before—most of my friends aren’t exactly the theatre type.”

The thing was, Adam *had* mentioned it before. He’d told them all once, backstage, about his friends at Ridgeway. That while they had, for the most part, accepted Adam’s impulsive decision to pursue a part in a Shakespearian production, they had also made it abundantly clear that it was a topic they held exactly zero interest in. Mary had commented, sans hesitation, that he should simply “get better friends,” but Adam had rebutted that; it wasn’t really *their* fault, he claimed, pointing out that it’s not like *anyone* could help what they were interested in. It was like how Adam had lost interest in playing for the school football team after a year—some things were simply not made for some people. It still saddened Neil to think about, though. Especially now, since it meant Adam had no one to run lines with.

Well, no one except—

Oh.

Neil took a sharp breath in. And then, against his better judgement, began to speak.

“Well, maybe… you could join… Ginny and I for a bit?” he suggested, tentatively.

“Oh.” Adam’s eyes widened, visibly taken aback. But his posture also loosened a little, and the worry creasing his face slowly began to diminish. “Are you sure?”

No, Neil wasn’t sure in the slightest. He knew what the poets—primarily Charlie—would say of the idea; Neil should act in the benefit of his own interest, which meant denying Adam and keeping the little line readings as something between him and Ginny; their own private rehearsals, just the two of them, no third wheels or third parties. Adding Adam into the equation, in whatever capacity, wouldn’t really enhance the romantic atmosphere—most likely, it would staunch it, demote it to ‘*complete* non-existence’ down from its current ‘*sort of* non-existence’. Not to mention that Neil had already begun planning, in lieu of him doing it today, to ask Ginny out whenever they ran lines next. Something made almost entirely impossible by Adam’s presence. Neil could hear Charlie lecturing him now—he may as well *shoot himself* if he decided to do something *that* stupid.

But.

But.

Adam *was* struggling with his lines. It was a sadly evident thing, made even more evident due to him sharing almost all of his scenes with Neil—who could recite the full script as easily as he could the Pythagorean theorem, or the four pillars of Welton, or his own full name. Neil winced every time Adam froze amidst one of his long speeches, soon followed by his face bunching up with embarrassment as Neil had to whisper the next line to him. Either that, or Adam improvised on the spot—and though Neil loved the slightly altered lines, he knew the stage directors (and the eventual audience) wouldn't appreciate it if, in the final performance, King Oberon sought after Queen Titania's "little *Asian* boy" instead of her "little *changeling* boy".

(*"But he* is *from India. I'm* technically *not wrong."*

"We know, Adam," Neil sighed. "But it's not the line—")

And damn it, Neil *liked* Adam. He didn't want to see his friend humiliated up on stage, or shouted at by the stage directors, or forced to recite his lines to the walls of his bedroom.

Besides. It's not as if things were going well today, anyway.

So he nodded, sealed his own mistake, and answered. "I'll talk to Ginny once she's recovered—but I'm sure she'll be alright with it."

Adam breathed a deep sigh of relief, clapping a hand onto Neil's back. "Thanks, Neil. Really. Honestly, you won't even notice I'm there half the time—"

“I think the goal is to notice you, Adam,” Neil said, with a laugh that hopefully covered his clenched teeth. “But yeah, I’ll get back to you on that once I’ve asked Ginny.”

Adam thanked Neil again before rushing out of the theatre, visibly less dour than he’d looked walking into the lobby. He held his head high, and wasn’t wringing his hands ruefully around his bag strap anymore —Neil felt both glad that could help, and worried at what Charlie would say hearing about this *second* setback.

Whatever, Neil decided. It was his life, he could do as he damn well pleased—he just hoped the universe didn’t have anything else planned for him today, that it would let him cycle back to Welton and be yelled at by his friends in peace.

The third thing to go wrong, naturally, was awaiting Neil outside.

It was, as he’d predicted, terribly cold as soon as he stepped out of the theatre—cold enough that he pulled his coat closer in on himself, and buried his hands in what shallow heat he could find in his pockets. It wasn’t quite winter yet and it wasn’t quite dark yet, but it was close enough to both that the air had a tangible bite to it. Neil hurried along towards where he’d parked his bike, stewing in the day’s failures, eager to be back at Welton—where it would likely be just as cold, admittedly, but at least *there* he had the benefits of bedding, blankets, and whatever warmth the busted heater in his room could provide. Maybe Charlie would wave him over to a seat by the common room fireplace before chewing him out, all the better to berate him when he wasn’t suffering from frostbite.

Neil walked smartly, so lost in his own thoughts that he almost strolled right past… *him*. Him, the boy sat, with his head buried in his bunched-up his knees, against the side of the theatre. Neil was a moment away from strolling past anyhow, too begrudged to bother investigating further—when he recognised the bundle of sweater and sandy-blonde hair, curled up in on itself. He stopped dead in his

tracks.

It was all he could do to not laugh at his own thrice-damned day.

Because of course.

Of course.

Of course, right as Neil was on the home straight, the stars themselves would deliver unto him… *him*.

Neil stared down pointedly at the boy, eyes hard and sharp as flint. It was then that he noticed the boy's head moving slightly—shivering, probably, in the cold, but *no*, no, that wasn't right. He *was* shivering, violently so, but his head bobbed and sank separately from that, with what Neil could, if he strained his ears properly, discern as—

Neil walked away quietly, making towards his bike. He made it only three steps before he came to a halt. One step—the fates were laughing at him. Another step—the universe was laughing at him. One final step—the stars were laughing at him. He cursed them all, silently, under his breath, so as not to alert the boy he was leaving behind, the boy crying into his knees—

Damn it.

Damn it, damn it, *damn it*.

Neil should *leave*. The entire accursed day had been a bust—a waste of

what precious little time he had on this earth. He had already shirked one promise, messed himself up further by making another one, what did he stand to gain from helping this one, *infuriatingly* intriguing boy? Because he knew, certainly, what he stood to lose—his friends' approval, his own dignity, his heart, anything in the damn world, if *he* asked for it then Neil would give it to him, and that was *dangerous*. It was safer, so much safer, to hop back on his bike and return to Welton. Return to Welton, not dig his grave any further, cut his losses now and *leave*.

But.

But.

Neil realised that that train of thought was operating under one, fatally flawed presumption. That being that Neil had any choice in this matter—which he didn't, not really. His fate had been sealed the moment he'd first heard those quiet, choked sobs, muffled from the boy hiding his face in his knees. No, no, his fate had been sealed the moment he'd recognised the boy at all, bundled up and shaking beside the theatre. After that, it had only been a matter of time before Neil's resolve broke—and he had stalled long enough, delaying the inevitable.

Well, Neil thought, *what was one more mistake today?*

He spun on his heel, walking back towards the crying boy with sharp, clacking footsteps, crouching down when he reached him. He wet his lips, lay a gentle hand on the boy's shivering shoulder, and spoke—as gentle as he could, as gentle as the falling snow, as gentle as whispered poetry, Neil *spoke*.

"Todd?"

Chapter End Notes

Kind of a shorter chapter (or at least it was meant to be, oops) but that's because the next one is a doooozzzyyyyy

Chapter title is, again, from echo

When Close Is Not Close Enough

Chapter Summary

Neil comforts Todd.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Todd looked up towards Neil. Neil almost flinched backwards, only catching himself at the last second.

Because Todd's face was red all over, *alarmingly* so. His cheeks and nose flushed from the cold, his lips an angry scarlet from where they'd been chewed on, and his *eyes*—they were a wreck, puffed-up and painful to look at, rubbed at until they were sore and the whites were turned pink.

"Todd?" Neil tried again. "Todd, are you alright?"

Todd quickly began wiping at his face, pushing a sleeve over the tracks that glittered down his cheeks. "N-N-No," he stammered, choking on the ruin of his own voice. "S-S-Sorry, I j-just… i-is Ginny h-here?"

Neil faltered, the cold slicing at his lungs as he sucked in a shallow breath. "I'm sorry Todd, but she's… she's already left."

"A-Already l-left?" The words came out wobbly, and Neil realised how utterly *helpless* he felt. He wished, not for the first time today, that the stupid donkey head prop hadn't been left out—that Ginny *was* here. She would know what to do in this situation. She'd be able to pick Todd up, whisk away all of his worries with a wave of her hand, wipe away his tears until he was smiling out sunbeams. All Neil could do

was awkwardly hold onto the boy's shoulder, and he wasn't even sure he should be doing *that*. It was a tad too intimate—certainly more so than Neil was comfortable with when it came to Todd.

"She sprained her ankle partway through rehearsal," Neil explained. "She had to be picked up by her brother."

Neil watched Todd fall silent, digesting the words. Neil almost continued, desperate to fill the emptiness of the air with *something*—an elaboration on what had happened, a condolence, an apology, *anything*, but he kept his mouth clamped shut. Instead, he pulled his focus onto the ragged breath of the shaking boy before him, how it caught in Todd's throat, how his eyes dropped to his bunched-up knees.

Then, to Neil's horror, Todd began to *laugh*.

It wasn't the laugh Neil had grown accustomed to—the one that was soft, and rare, and never failed to fill the theatre lobby with a pleasant warmth. The one that had dug itself into Neil's ears, so that he could dream of it later in the quiet of his room back at Welton, while he lay awake in his bed. No, this laugh was a small, wet, and ugly thing, that shook the boy beneath Neil's hand as it spilled out.

"Of c-c-course," Todd spat, his voice all chopped up—and God, Neil couldn't even tell if it was his stutter or his shivering. Todd let out another breathy, heartbreaking laugh, and then pressed his face back into his knees.

Neil's hand still sat rigid atop Todd's shoulder, and though it was already a step too far, Neil knew it wasn't enough—he needed to slide his hand down to Todd's back, around between his shoulder blades, rub comforting circles into the wool of the boy's sweater. Like he'd seen Ginny do, all the way back on his first night at the Danburry's.

No, Neil thought, that wasn't enough either; he needed to wrap himself around Todd, hook his chin into the crook of his neck, let the boy bury his head into Neil's shoulder and cry, cry out all of his woes until they were nothing but a sodden patch on Neil's Welton blazer.

But Neil couldn't do any of those things. He just kept his hand there, arm out stiff and straight and still, and it wasn't close to *enough*.

Because *enough* was something that Neil couldn't risk.

"Hey, hey," Neil whispered, trying to come off as reassuring. Todd tilted his face up, so that his eyes peeked over his kneecaps. He stared at Neil, light gleaming in the streaks tears had left down his face, scrunching up his reddened nose. He seemed confused, almost, that Neil was treating him with such delicate care—which he wasn't exactly alone on, at least. A breeze skittered by them, and Neil felt it on his outstretched hand when a steep shiver ran through Todd.

"Why don't we find someplace a bit warmer to sit?" Neil muttered. "Where's your house, Todd?"

Todd mumbled something into his legs.

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch that…?"

"I-I c-can't go b-back there…" he sobbed. "N-Not r-right now." Fresh tears formed like dew-drops in Todd's lashes, threatening to fall and stain his cheeks further.

"Okay, okay." Neil retreated his hand, slotting it clumsily back beside his own torso. He ignored how much colder his palm felt now that it

had been removed, how hard he had to fight the urge to immediately return it to Todd's shoulder. "What about Ginny's house?" he suggested. "We could walk there together."

Todd shook his head. "N-No, no… I c-can't…"

Neil stood. "Well, we can't stay here. Come on." He offered out his arm for Todd, who stared at it, puzzled, before hesitantly allowing himself to be pulled up. Neil's heart pounded as he stood face to face with him, so close he could see the small clouds of breath escaping Todd's lips. He quickly stepped back, turned away to inspect the nearby buildings. "Perhaps they'll let us back into the theatre…"

Todd watched him in a sniffling silence, and Neil could feel the boy's misty stare burning into the side of his face. He didn't dare look over at Todd. Not until he spoke up, at least.

"I-I-I m-might know a p-place…"

Neil tilted his head, spinning back around. "Really?" Todd nodded, still pawing weakly at his eyes, biting at his lower lip and averting his gaze down to the floor. "Okay," Neil hummed as he stepped away to fetch his bike, wheeling it beside him until he was stopped beside Todd. He gestured towards the path. "Lead the way, then."

Neil followed two paces behind Todd as he led him down the street, a slow wind buffeting the pair as they made their way through the dusklit town. It was near silent, save for the creaking of Neil's bike and the distant rumble of cars, several blocks removed from them. Neil wondered if he should quicken his steps, try to catch up to the boy ahead of him—the boy who he constantly heard sniffing, who he saw incessantly wiping his sleeve against his face, who he swore was choking back sobs on every other occasion. But what could he say that he hadn't already said? What could he do that he hadn't already

considered? What could he offer that he could *allow* himself to offer? Neil didn't know the answers—and so he only hovered, biting back his concerns.

They walked until they were outside the town centre, where the shops and other services bled into the endless houses of the suburbs. Todd stopped beside a bridge set atop wide, stone arches, reaching over the meandering river below, shielded on both sides by tall birch trees. Neil had never come this way before—it led further away from Welton, following the river as it wound its way away from the lake and through the town. Todd picked his way around the low stone wall of the bridge, disappearing down the slope beside the road. Neil confusedly parked his bike beside the wall and then wandered around it to where Todd had vanished—a worn path, almost invisible underneath the tall grass, led down and under the bridge, into the arch which sat halfway atop the hillside.

It was down there, beneath the stone curve of the bridge, that he found Todd again. Neil entered the arch and peered downwards over the edge on his left side—a few feet down, the river flowed lazily by, unaware of the two boys tucked away on the ledge above it. It wasn't much warmer than it would've been on the street outside the theatre, but it was… oddly *cozy*. And it did shelter them from the wind, which didn't count for nothing—secluded, also, holding no risk of someone else stumbling upon them.

"Quite the spot," Neil remarked. His voice echoed in the space.

Todd had, once again, curled himself up on the smooth, cold stonework. And so, once again, his answer came muffled through his legs. "I-I come h-here sometimes. I-It's p-private. M-My h-house isn't f-far, either."

"Hm." Neil moved further in, inspecting the underside of the arch over their heads. The light of the setting sun was reflecting off of the ripples below, painting the 'ceiling' with crosshatches of shimmery,

dancing white lines. The shelf that he and Todd were perched on was clearly cut out of the hillside, and had a comfortable few steps of length between the edge to Neil's left and the brick to his right. The floor was slightly slanted, but it was a shallow angle at best, and the stone was worn down rough enough that Neil didn't worry about slipping off.

It was as he'd described it before. Oddly cozy.

As Neil took in the space, he also noticed the object sitting derelict beside Todd—which must've been there before either of them had come down here. Neil imagined that it wasn't Todd's first visit down here, today, then. Maybe this was where he'd waited while rehearsals were still going on.

"What's that?" Neil pointed towards the object.

Todd mumbled something to himself, not even lifting his gaze.

"Todd?"

Todd rolled his head to the side to stare at Neil, not bothering to hide the red of his eyes and the wet of his cheeks. "It's… m-my *birthday present,*" he answered, as if it were obvious.

Oh.

"Today's your birthday?"

Todd scoffed. It was an ugly noise, made uglier by the ruin of his throat.

“Happy birthday,” Neil said softly, crouching down beside the boy once again. “Is, uh, *that* why you’re…” Neil, trying not to be rude but not having the proper words, simply gestured up at Todd’s face. “… like this?”

Todd nodded, weakly—before turning his attention back across the water, to the other side of the arch.

“Not happy with your…” Neil stood back up, squinting over Todd’s bundled form, trying to make out the shape of the object lying dejected next to its owner. “…desk set?”

Todd simply stared ahead. He, almost invisibly, shrugged. “It’s… it’s the s-same one I g-got l-last year.”

Neil frowned. “Did you… need a new one?”

Todd tried for a smile—it came out broken, crooked, not reaching his eyes. “Th-The old o-one’s s-still *in my r-room*.” His sorry attempt at a smile crumbled as he buried his chin back beneath his kneecaps. “I m-mean, they c-could’ve g-gone in and *looked*, b-but th-they didn’t…” he mumbled.

Neil felt an overwhelming need to sit back down and sidle up beside Todd, press his body against his, lay a head on the boy’s shoulder. The need infested Neil’s brain like an itch. An itch he pointedly ignored, in favour of manoeuvring around Todd—keeping a careful distance between them—and stepping over towards the desk set to get a closer look.

“It’s f-funny,” Todd said, while Neil bent down to pick up the boy’s birthday gift. As he spun it over in his hands, he turned to see Todd staring up at him—no humour on his face, only new-shed tears and a serene sort of resignation. “I-I d-didn’t even l-like it the first time.”

Neil looked back down at the object in his hands.

What had Ginny said before, about Todd? About why he spent so much time over at the Danburry’s? About Todd’s parents? *They don’t pay attention to Todd, really,* she’d said. *All their attention is on his brother…* Neil had known it could’ve been bad. But this… this was so much worse than he’d imagined. Small wonder Todd would rather stay over there, with Ginny, if *this* was how his own family had treated him.

Valedictorian, team captain, Ivy League scholar… poor Todd has to live up to all that, and if he can’t…? He’s worthless to them. Ginny had spat the words out, and the reason behind her venom was painfully obvious now. Neil felt the desk set digging into his fists where he was gripping it tightly, as if he was trying to snap it in two with nothing but his hands. It was one thing to be crushed under the suffocating expectations of his father—but to simply be ignored so completely? Worse, to be told and treated as if he was *worthless*—

Neil remembered, once again, that night at the Danburry’s, when he’d first had a conversation with Todd—how Todd had reacted to Neil even *saying* his brother’s name aloud. It had flipped a switch in the quiet boy’s mind, as if the two words were enough to make the boy wither and shy away. Like a dog, who’d been beaten down.

And that wasn’t the only thing, Neil realised.

Gripping the wood of the desk set so solidly that his knuckles were turning white, Neil thought back on… well, *everything*.

How Todd would always duck his head and avoid the spotlight, as if he wasn't deserving of any attention at all. How he invariably stuttered over his own voice, cut off the ends of his own sentences, as if he wasn't well-practised with speaking to an audience which considered what he said important. How he was so thoroughly hesitant to smile, or to laugh, or to share anything that made him happy—as if he wasn't deserving of it, as if he was only ever permitted misery and nothing else, as if every single sliver of joy he experienced was something he'd had to steal against the world's permission.

Every smile a secret. Every laugh, but a breath. Every word a whisper.

Of course Todd refused to share anything with anyone. Of course Todd walked around, unaware of how goddamn *brilliant* his poetry was. Of course Todd was ashamed of every single part of himself, unwilling to think for a moment that he could even have a *scrap* of something worth anything within him.

It wasn't Todd's fault he was the way he was—it had *never* been his fault.

Not when he'd been sneaking around Neil, trying not to be discovered. Not when he'd been insisting that he should leave, as to not intrude in on Neil's dinner with the Danburry's. Not when he'd had all the other Danburry's answering Neil's questions for him over dinner, probably too overwhelmed to respond himself, something all the other Danburry's were probably *aware* of. Not when he'd run off in tears, after Neil had confessed to peeking into his notebook.

Not when he'd been protesting being allowed into the theatre, after

the very first rehearsal, sitting outside until Ginny and Neil had yanked him in. Not when he'd done the same every single rehearsal after, always followed by them yanking him in again, every single time. Not when he'd startled when Adam had thrown his arm over his shoulder, nor when he'd been too nervous to approach Ginny when she was lost talking to Mary in the lobby. Not when he'd clamped a hand over his mouth after laughing too loudly at a joke Neil had made. Not when he'd smiled up at Neil when Neil had come over to run lines, nor when he'd slinked out of the room, probably disheartened because Neil had *ignored* him.

And *definitely* not when he'd been discovered by Neil that very afternoon, crying outside of the theatre. And Neil had almost ignored him *again*. Not any of the millions time before, not any of the million times to come. None of it—*none of it*—had been Todd's fault.

God.

God.

Had Neil really… really been about to *ignore* Todd? Because of what—because he'd felt *strangely drawn* to him a couple dozen times? Because he had been having a slightly off day beforehand? Because of whatever Neil had done earlier that had made him so upset—what had all that been about, even?

It was harrowing, how quickly the world had closed in around them, shrinking to encompass only him, and Todd, and the desk set in his hands. How quickly everything else had faded from view, pushed out of the spotlight, bumped backstage because none it seemed to matter that much, not to Neil, not anymore.

Neil had thought he'd been having a terrible day. The worst. Because… what, he'd been slightly inconvenienced by an

understandable mistake? Because he'd agreed to helping out one of his friends, who was caught in a tough spot? Because he'd had to deal with *Todd*, sitting alone and sobbing on his birthday—

The idea that Neil's day was the worst, or terrible, or even remotely that *bad*, now seemed laughable. Ridiculous. Impossibly *imbecilic*. Because here Neil was, fretting over his asking out of a girl being delayed by *at best* a week, when Todd was…

God, it was Todd's *birthday*, and here he was… and here *Neil* was, thinking he'd had it rough, and here they both… *were*.

Todd, with his knees bunched-up against his chest, face wrecked from crying, a sharply polished reminder of the callous disinterest his parents perceived him with only an arm's length away. Neil, holding said sharply polished reminder, and refusing to let himself help, because he was too selfish to risk a single toe—even if it would mean the world to the boy next to him.

Neil's hold on the desk set loosened, the ache in his fingers ebbing away as a heavy weight settled atop him—like snow, building up on top of a house.

God.

Neil was *stupid*.

Neil was going to let Todd go because of daydreams and dandelion fluff. Neil was going to ignore Todd because of imagined kisses and infiltrated poetry. Neil was going to refuse to look Todd in the eye for as long as he could bear it because of his own cold, raw, *stupidity*. He let out a long breath, like the breeze flowing gently through the birch trees above them.

But not anymore.

He looked down at Todd, who was watching the water with a distant, detached look, arms wrapped around himself. Neil smiled, and though he felt himself falling—falling ever further down, down the spiral of all those *mistakes* he made around Todd—he didn't stop. He wouldn't stop, he told himself. His stomach somersaulted into his throat but he just kept grinning, turning the desk set over and over in his hands until he worked up the words that would fix things, that would set things right between them, that would make up for all of Neil's idiocy before.

"Todd," he said suddenly, breaking the silence that had formed over them. Todd turned to him. Neil took another breath in, and continued. "I think… I think you're underestimating the value of this desk set." Todd eyed him curiously, which Neil was glad for—curious was better than crying. He gestured down to the boy's birthday present in his hands, even rotated it around so that he could show off its flat, reflective cover. "I mean, let's be honest here… who the hell would want a *football*, or— Or a *baseball*…"

"…or a car," Todd muttered darkly, before he seemed to realise what he was saying—or that he was saying something at all. His eyes widened with a momentary surprise, but Neil simply laughed.

"…or a *car*," he added, winking at Todd, who was slowly unfolding his limbs as he watched Neil's farce with a gathering interest. "When they could have a desk set as wonderful as this one? Why, I'd even go as far as to say *two* isn't enough." He paused, gaze dropping down to gauge his audience's reaction. Neil's heart leapt when he saw the makings of a smile—a *genuine* smile—slowly starting to peel through Todd's dour expression. "I know that I, personally, would need *at least* three—" he continued, voice growing louder and bolder. "No, five— No, a dozen! I'd need at least a *dozen* of these fine desk sets to truly be happy in life." His words reverberated around the belly of the bridge, circling in the air and shaking through the foundation they stood

upon. Neil allowed the sounds to fade into silence, until the low rustle of the water below them was all that could be heard.

"In fact," he mused, bringing the desk set up to his eye level, narrowing a single eyelid and squeezing shut the other—so as to appear as if he were inspecting it more closely. "Its shape, its build, its… its *material*! It all seems rather…" Neil made a great show of pondering over every single square inch of the shining, wooden surface. "…*seaworthy*, wouldn't you say?"

Todd shot smartly up on his feet. He laughed, quietly and rasping, but he *laughed*, and his smile had broken through completely and was shining out of his face and Neil had never felt his heart beat this fast. He bowed deeply, and then offered the desk set out to its rightful owner.

"Would you, Todd Anderson," he announced, "do the honours of sending this here desk set out on its maiden voyage?"

Todd took it carefully from Neil's hands, arms sinking with its weight. "Th-Thank you," he whispered, voice still broken.

Neil stepped swiftly aside, waving out his hand towards the edge, beckoning for Todd to approach it—which he did, albeit in small, tentative steps. Once Todd had the tips of his shoes mere inches from the ledge, Neil stood to attention, back ramrod straight. He stared out solemnly towards the bridge's next pillar, where the arch hanging over them curved back down to the stone foundation. He placed his arms behind his back in mock reverence.

"And so we christen this here vessel… the *USS Desk Set*."

Todd didn't hesitate—with a mad sparkle of glee in his expression,

Todd flung the desk set out over the river with an enthusiasm Neil hadn't seen from the boy before (but hoped terribly he would again). Time seemed to slow down as the desk set crashed into the river's surface, sending up a sizeable plume of water, making a noise that was almost comical—as if Todd had thrown a giant stone in, instead. Sheets of paper, having come loose during the throw, floated in the air for a moment before sailing downward, growing dark and damp as they were swallowed by the current. Some pens and other stationery had also broken free, and sunk not a moment after the desk set with a delightful series of smaller splashes—like the smaller pops of sparks that followed a firework explosion. Neil's jaw ached from grinning, but he just couldn't help himself; he watched a pair of scissors, metal blades glinting in the now twilight, become lost in the foggy water, and let out a laugh. And he and Todd both cheered when the desk set reemerged, bobbing unsteadily as it was pulled downriver, a glossy wooden raft that winked with light as it disappeared from view.

"Beautiful," Neil declared, wiping fake tears from his eyes. Beside him, he could just make out Todd wiping away the dried tracks of the *very real* tears he'd been crying before. He turned to Neil, dizzying smile on his face.

"B-Beautiful," he agreed, a blush to his cheeks.

"Well, glad we sorted that," Neil said, stepping back from the edge. "I say give it a few more birthdays, and we might be able to launch a whole fleet."

Todd laughed, his voice having recovered some of its strength, and the pretty sound echoed around the arch. Neil, for the first time in what felt like months, simply let himself drink in the feeling—he'd never seen Todd smile so brightly, so that crow's feet formed beside his eyes; or laugh so openly, flashing his endearingly half-crooked teeth. Neil let the warmth he so often felt around Todd simply wash over him, let it creep up into his face, let something in his chest flutter and something in his throat hitch. He finally let himself *want*—want to bury himself in Todd's smile, in his laughter, want to wrap both around him as if it were a warmed blanket on a wintry night. He

wanted to experience both in every moment of his day, wanted neither to ever leave him, not for as long as Neil still lived and breathed, he wanted—

Todd, slowly steadying his breaths, ran a hand through his hair as he settled down. He met Neil's eyes and Neil, determined not to make a fool out of himself, only nodded back towards the path winding out—suddenly and starkly aware that he very well might ruin the moment by doing something impetuous if it lasted any longer. Together, the two boys picked their way uphill through the grass, back onto the bridge proper.

"I-It's a shame we didn't h-have any champagne."

Neil wheeled around to see Todd resting back against the low balustrade of the bridge, hair falling over his face. He wasn't sure he'd heard the boy correctly.

"Pardon?"

"I m-meant…" Todd stammered, fumbling with his fingers. "D-Don't you usually christen sh-ships with champagne?"

Neil stared at Todd. Todd, who had just made a *joke*. Todd picked at his hands, uncertain, before Neil couldn't help himself any longer and broke down into a laugh, his body bending in half with it. It wasn't even particularly funny—no offence to Todd—but he was simply so *happy* to be here, Neil realised, standing atop a random, nowhere bridge, with Todd Anderson making *jokes* with him. Once he'd regained the strength in the abdomen to look up again, he caught Todd watching him with an adoring look on his face.

"You're *dead on*, Todd," Neil agreed. "We'll have to bring champagne

next year!”

“Yeah…” Todd sighed, slowly sliding his gaze down towards the river below. “Next year…”

Neil hesitated—remembered that he wasn’t doing that anymore, would never be doing it again—and then moved right up beside Todd, nudging at the boy’s side with his elbow until Todd looked back up. (Without any irritation, Neil noted with relief; only an amused furrow of the brow.)

“Next year,” Neil breathed, because Todd was *so close to him* and he could feel the boy’s warmth through where Neil’s elbow was still pressed into his sweater, “we’ll grab some champagne, we’ll invite Ginny down here… and then we’ll all celebrate another boat launching. Together. Alright?”

Todd’s face seemed to melt, his expression softening as his eyes creased and his smile lit back up. A few tears began to spring to his eyes, and Neil flared with panic.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“N-No, no, don’t be sorry…” Todd laughed, batting at his eyes again.

Neil studied Todd, cogs whirring in his brain as the boy tried wiping away his new tears with his already saturated sleeves. Then Neil hit his hands against his forehead. “God! I’m such an idiot!”

Todd shook his head, grinning. “No, N-Neil it’s fine, they’re n-not because of…”

“No, I— *God*, I’m so sorry, I just remembered…” Neil pulled himself away, running back to his bike—or, more specifically, to his bag, which he began sifting through. Not through the main pocket, however, but a smaller one tucked onto the side, from which he produced—

“Here!” Neil cried, rushing back over and shoving the crumpled handkerchief into Todd’s outheld hands. It was the one he’d often use to wrap any snack he was taking to rehearsals, an unremarkable square of baby-blue fabric, its existence having all but left his memory until now. “It’s been so long since I put that in there, I completely forgot, and I’m so stupid— If I’d remembered it earlier, I could’ve—”

“N-Neil,” Todd cut in, taking the handkerchief gratefully and using it to wipe away his tears. “*Thank you*.”

Neil swallowed. “Anytime,” he replied, voice cracking on the second syllable.

Todd finished drying his eyes, then stared sadly at the now darkened cloth. His smile fell as he wrung the handkerchief in his hands, and Neil moved—on instinct—closer. “Are you alright?” he asked again.

“Neil, c-can I ask you something?”

“Anything, Todd,” Neil whispered. He heard Todd inhale a sharp breath.

“W-Why?”

Neil moved his face just the tiniest amount closer, tilting it to the side, as if to hear Todd better. “Why?” he echoed, not grasping the word’s meaning. “What do you mean, why?”

Todd sniffled. “Why… why do all th-this, Neil? I’m not… n-not anything to you, not r-really, and yet…” Neil reached both his hands out slowly, taking Todd’s trembling ones in his own. Todd’s eyes flicked downwards where they were now holding each other, but he didn’t shove Neil off—he even seemed to clasp onto his blazer cuffs in turn, though that might’ve been Neil’s imagination. “I mean… w-why help me? All this m-making me feel better, it… d-doesn’t make sense.” Neil looked up to see Todd worrying away at his bottom teeth with his lip, sandy-blonde hair falling over his face.

“Todd,” Neil said softly, moving his gaze back down to their linked hands. Subconsciously, he’d begun rubbing small circles into the wool of Todd’s sleeve. “We’re… *friends*, aren’t we?”

He felt Todd freeze under him, for a moment, before he nodded—once, and firmly. The movement loosed a single, final tear from his eye, which Neil lifted his hand to thumb away.

“*Exactly*, Todd. I—” Neil cleared his throat. “*People* care about you, Todd, more than you know. I couldn’t leave you to be so… *morose*, on your birthday.”

Neil wasn’t sure if what he’d said was working, as Todd’s face was just as red as it had looked when he’d first seen him today. But the boy managed a chuckle, smile slipping back in place, as he repeated, “*morose*?”

Neil scoffed through his own smile, lifting his hand once again—this time, to lightly punch Todd on his arm. “Oh, shut up. As if you aren’t a proper *Walt Whitman* yourself.”

Todd began to laugh again, but it came up as a hiccup—which only made the two boys laugh more, both growing too weak to hold onto each other. They broke apart into two separate piles of mirth.

"Thank you," Todd said again, once he'd recovered.

"Anytime," Neil replied, again. He stared up at the rapidly darkening sky, felt the chill creep back into his bones, and tutted. "Now, we really need to get you somewhere warm before it's nighttime… where do you need to be?"

Todd winced as he straightened himself. "I was *s-supposed* to have dinner at the Danburry's. But I-I won't make it before it gets dark. I'll j-just walk h-home—"

"You're not going back there," Neil interrupted.

Todd shrugged, having apparently already reconciled with his fate. If he noticed Neil seething, he didn't call it out—and Neil *was* seething. Because he couldn't believe it; Todd's parents were perfectly okay with their son spending his birthday dinner at someone else's house, with someone else's family. Certainly, it was what the boy wanted anyway—but Neil suspected that *that* wasn't the reason Todd's parents had allowed it.

And it was back to *that* house that Todd was going to return to for tonight?

Over Neil's cold, dead *corpse*.

“No, Todd, I don’t think you understand,” Neil ground out. “You’re *not* going back *there*.”

Todd sighed, picking at his cuticles. “What other option d-do I have?” Todd asked, helplessly.

“I could take you,” Neil suggested, gesturing back towards his bike with a flourish. The idea was only forming in his mind as the words left his mouth—but the more he spoke, the more sense it made. “We’ll ride back to the Danburry’s, together,” he finished, proudly.

Todd stared at him, blank look on his face.

Neil sighed. “We can ride tandem,” he explained. “Trust me, I’ve done it plenty of times with my friends, it’ll be fine.” A little bit of a lie, on Neil’s part, considering he’d only ever ridden tandem on a bike *once*. It had been with Charlie, and had only lasted an incredibly wobbly ten seconds before Neil had nearly collided with a tree, after which he’d ordered Charlie off and vowed never to attempt it again.

“Are you sure?” Todd asked.

Neil almost laughed. Was that even a question? “More than anything, Todd. Come on.” Neil led them both back to where he’d parked the bike, hooking his leg over the central bar to demonstrate his point. “You hop on the seat, and hold onto my shoulders. We’ll be at the Danburry’s in no time.”

Todd seemed to be scrutinising every single aspect of the idea, eyes narrowed with scepticism. After a prolonged period of deliberation, however, Todd relented, and clambered onto the back. Neil almost choked on his own tongue when he felt Todd’s hands grasp his shoulders, firm and tactile despite the layers of cloth separating them.

“Ready?” Neil called, the word coming out a pitch higher than usual.

Todd sounded as if he was having trouble breathing—must’ve been his concerns over the exact safety of this technique—but he managed to utter, “ready.”

Neil smiled to himself. Then he kicked off of the pavement, steering them both onto the road, as behind them the day’s last few rays of sun disappeared from between the birch trees.

Chapter End Notes

Had this one finished for a bit but I kept going back for edits and edits and edits

Title from Pier 4. Go listen to it, it's very Todd Anderson-coded. (because the pier, its like the dock that he runs to. and 'playing out moments when there was a touch'???? thank you clairo your grammys looks was amazing and your new mv featuring weird al was incredible)

When Candles Burn Out And The Record Is Faded Down

Chapter Summary

> Neil comes back to Welton, late, again. He has to explain himself to his friends, again. He's got a lot to explain, for better or for worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil's heart was hammering in his throat as he cycled back to Welton, racing beneath the glittering stars hung in the black sky above. He let out a laugh, simply because he *could*, as he trundled his way through the gates of Welton, smiling helplessly up into the yawning sea of beacons above. He was weightless, he was flying, he was—

—incredibly shocked that he and Todd were still in one, unbruised piece. It hadn't taken long for Neil to remember exactly why *he'd quit riding tandem following his brief stint with Charlie; he and Todd had barely been off the bridge and Neil's control over the bike was already wavering, the balance teetering dangerously—it had taken several stops and starts off the side of the road before it all had begun to feel smooth.*

But once it had?

Well, Neil didn't have the words for it. It was one thing to be rolling down the hill beside Welton; slicing a path through the grass, sending up splashes of water cutting over the lake's outlet, scaring flocks of geese into the air with an uproarious wing-flapping. It was another thing entirely to be sailing along the streets of the town under the twilight—with a comforting weight sat upon the bike's back, hands clasped onto Neil's shoulders, rumbling over pebbled paths and kicking up leaf litter; laughing with Todd under the lavender sky.

“Secure there, Todd?” Neil called.

“I think so,” Todd called back faintly, voice carried away by the wind. “Are you sure you’ve d-done this before?”

“Positive,” Neil replied.

Neil navigated through the darkened alleys working on memory alone—Todd’s memory, to be exact. Whenever they’d hit an intersection, Todd would instruct Neil on which street he should veer into by simply tapping the direction into the corresponding shoulder. Then Neil would wheel them into the turn, earning a squawk from the boy behind him when the bike leant a little too far into the curve for his comfort.

By the halfway point of their journey, Todd was digging his fingers sharply into Neil’s shoulders. But Neil found that he didn’t mind it; Between Todd’s fingernails being bitten down to the quick and the cushioning of Neil’s blazer, it wasn’t exactly painful. And it served as a solid, physical reminder that Todd was there*—a tangible assurance that the past hour or so* hadn’t *been some elaborate hallucination, that Neil really* did *have Todd Anderson sitting on the seat behind him, that Todd* hadn’t *fallen off the bike two streets ago without Neil noticing.*

Though, digging in as they were, Neil couldn’t help but notice—the hands sat upon his shoulders were still trembling. Terribly, at that.

“Todd, are you cold?” Neil asked.

“N-No,” Todd quickly answered, the chatter of his teeth betraying him.

“You are,” Neil stated, beginning to think of ways to warm the boy up—he

didn't have anything in his bag, to his knowledge, so that was no help.

It was funny, in a way, that Todd was so cold, since the task of transporting two teenage boys by bike (twice as many as Neil was used to) had left Neil veritably sweating, *and—*

"Todd," Neil said, deciding to bite the proverbial bullet before he overthought things. "Lean into me."

*"*W-What*?" Todd sputtered.*

"It'll help, trust me," Neil insisted. "I'm sweltering anyway, it'll be good for me, too."

A pause, and then. "I-If you're c-certain," Todd replied. Then, slowly, Neil began to feel the weight behind him tentatively shift around, rearranging itself until Todd's chest was pressed up against Neil's back. It was… comforting, Neil found. Until a small, ragged breath came out of Todd's mouth, which was right up close to Neil's neck, and he almost swerved them both off of the road.

"Sorry!" Neil yelped. "Maybe don't— Maybe move your head? You're just kind of… breathing onto my neck, and it's…" Electrifying. Tantalising. Sending his heart into cardiac arrest— *"…tickling."*

"Sorry," Todd squeaked out, now right into the shell of Neil's ear. Which wasn't terrifically better, but it would have to do.

"It's fine." It really wasn't fine. Neil's problem—that being how torrid he was getting beneath his blazer—hadn't been solved at all. In fact, it had at least doubled in magnitude, with Neil's face feeling as if it was on fire.

Thank God Todd couldn't see it, Neil was probably redder than a rose at the moment. It was also getting incredibly stuffy, and Neil was sweating, and he was about to tell Todd to maybe pull off a little actually—

When Todd, oh-so hesitantly, wrapped his arms around Neil's midsection.

And.

Well.

If Todd wasn't warm by now, then the boy was a medical mystery. Because Neil was toastier than fresh-baked loaves of bread straight out of the oven, steam pouring off of him and everything.

But something had also shifted—Todd's arms were *cold, shockingly so, and were pleasantly cooling around Neil's torso. Neil let out a single, soft breath, and relaxed into his new position. And so they continued that way, snug and silent, Neil's heat slowly bleeding out into the air, as they rode on into the night. Todd's weight remained an easy pressure on Neil's back, all the way until they wound around to a* very *familiar street, and Neil came to a rolling stop—*

Right outside of Welton, Neil hummed under his breath as he hastily parked his bike. Then he threw himself through the school's double front doors—which, lucky for him, hadn't been locked yet—before skipping through the empty Welton halls. Neil knew that he had a fat, stupid grin on his face, but he couldn't help it.

So it was with that fat, stupid grin on his face that he almost collided with one Dr. Hager.

“*Mr. Perry*,” Dr. Hager droned. “I was beginning to worry where you were.”

“Hi, yes, sorry,” Neil rambled, standing up out of his slouch, bouncing on his feet. “*Sir*.”

“I… noticed you weren’t present at dinner,” Dr. Hager continued, eying Neil up and down. He cleared his throat, apparently electing to ignore Neil’s boundless energy. “We called the Everett Theatre, and yet staff reported that all students had left on time.”

It came as no surprise that Neil had missed dinner—he’d barely arrived within curfew, if his internal clock was accurate—but it was rather alarming that, in all of the afternoon’s (now *evening’s*) confusion, Neil had also forgotten about having dinner *at all*. It wasn’t that he *wasn’t* hungry, he’d simply been too preoccupied to notice it, what with the… *everything* that had happened.

“Ah. Yes. Well.” With great effort, Neil smothered his grin behind his lips, putting up the most innocent face he could muster. “One of my friends was having… *issues*… with their… method of transportation home.” He flashed his teeth, this time in one of his facsimile smiles meant for adults—the genuine one beneath fought to shine through, but Neil *firmly* swallowed it back. “I offered to assist, and I’m afraid that I then lost track of time— I apologise for causing any worry.”

Dr. Hager inspected Neil openly, single eyebrow raised just above the frame of his glasses. “You… *assisted*… your friend?” he said, slowly. “Might I inquire as to *how*?”

“I… well… we *both* rode on the same bicycle,” Neil explained, his face heating up slightly. “Much, uh… much faster than walking.”

Dr. Hager made a disapproving noise in the back of his throat. “The mechanics of that method sound… *unsafe*,” he remarked. “And… possibly damaging to the bicycle which, might I remind you, is Welton property.”

“I understand,” Neil replied.

Dr. Hager removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I hope this stunt was done in the case of an *emergency*, and is not something you hope to repeat?”

Neil paused. So far he hadn’t been lying—he *had* needed to help out a friend, transportation *had* been an issue, and it *was* the reason he was late. And yes, in Neil’s humble opinion, this *had been* an emergency.

But it to say Neil didn’t want to repeat the experience?

That was another story.

He nodded, furiously, anyway. “I understand, sir,” he repeated. “And I apologise, again.”

Dr. Hager sighed, resting his glasses back on his ears. “Just don’t make a habit of it,” he replied, waving Neil off. “This behaviour would normally earn you demerits, but you’ve missed dinner already—I suppose that serves as punishment enough. Go on.”

“Thanks, sir,” Neil answered, already turning to scurry away. “And goodnight!”

“Goodnight, Mr. Perry.”

Neil wasn’t terribly bothered by having missed dinner. He was hungry, certainly, but he had gone to bed hungry before—it really wasn’t that huge of a deal by now. Besides—he wouldn’t have chosen a plate of dinner over his afternoon with Todd any day of the week, even if he *had* remembered it to be an option. Hell-ton hash could hardly compare to the genuine, glowing smile that was already creeping back onto his face, or the warm laughter that kept bubbling up his throat, or the fuzzy feeling running through him, lighting up his entire body like a livewire. *No*, Neil thought, he wouldn’t trade those for any meal in the world.

Especially not after the drop-off at the Danburry’s.

Which reminded him—he had a question to ask he needed to ask the poets, after he finished depositing his bag and such. He climbed up the stairs several steps at a time, eagerly bounding towards his room. Neil reached the door with a song under his breath, moving his arm up to the knob impatiently, placed his fingers atop the brass—

With a yank, Neil pulled out the misbehaving kickstand. It left flecks of rust on his hand, which he wiped away against his pants before he stood up. His back cricked with the motion.

“God, I’m never riding tandem again*,” he moaned. Because really—his spine was shot with aches, tip-to-tail, all of which promised to be worse by next morning. His legs were sore from pedalling the combined mass of the two boys, his feet wobbling now that they were back on solid ground. And his backside—Neil’s backside felt as if it’d been paddled down the middle, his tailbone likely bruised from sitting on the central bar for so long.*

“Th-That’s a shame,” Todd answered, milling around beneath a streetlight already, waiting. “I was hoping f-for some more free r-rides.”

Neil's heart skipped a beat. "On second thought," he mused, "I'll probably get used to it after a while, so…"

Todd smiled at him, the white of his teeth bright from the glow of the bulb above him—and Neil swore that his body's pains faded, just the tiniest bit, as he wandered up towards the other boy.

Beneath the bright light of the streetlight, it was obvious that Todd was in far better straits now than he'd been before. His face was completely dry, if still a little puffy around the eyes. His shoulders were no longer bending inwards, his cheeks looked less hollowed out, and the wind had even pulled his hair up and out from where it'd been sticking to his tearstains—now it had a subtle lift to the fringe, one which was making it irritably tempting for Neil to run his hands through it.

Not to mention that Todd had finally stopped shivering so terribly—Neil's idea had worked after all. Even separated, as they'd been since the bike had rolled to a stop, Todd's face was flushed in the cold air. It wouldn't be surprising if Todd had some lingering warmth from leaning into Neil the whole ride—especially since Neil could still feel the calmingly cold ghosts of Todd's arms, wrapped around his torso.

Neil shook his head, turning away and beginning their walk towards the whitewashed door of the Danburry household. "Is this all you're doing for your birthday?" he asked, as his shoes clacked against the pavers.

Neil heard Todd pause for a split second, a momentary break in the beat of the boy's footsteps. "I s-suppose*," he answered.*

"Nothing later in the week?" Neil prodded, shooting a careful glance back.

Todd was chewing on his lip. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Hm," Neil muttered. "Alright."

Neil wasn't going to push Todd, considering what the boy had already been subject to today. But as they both continued up the steps of the house, Neil couldn't get the topic off of his mind—because really. *It was* terribly *unfair that Todd should have such a rotten birthday, so fraught with strife, with only the condolence of a warm dinner at the end. Granted, it was a warm dinner with his best friend and a loving, welcoming family (Chet excluded), which was more than most of the boys at Welton could hope for.*

But at Welton, at least, one would have all of his friends around; gathered in one of their rooms (or, more recently, in a cave only a short walk into the woods), oftentimes with a little something that one member of the group had swiped from the kitchens, everyone singing their congratulations as loudly and terribly as they could manage. It wasn't fancy, or familial, but there was a level of… camaraderie *to it, the sense that you belonged among your peers, that you were cherished, that you were valued.*

Neil stopped behind Todd, who'd stopped right at the door.

"You okay?" Neil asked.

Todd was looking down, seemingly studying the Danburry's' dirt-spotted welcome mat. "Wh-What if I-I'm too l-late? A-And they'd thought I-I'd g-gone h-h-home?" he stammered.

"Oh. Maybe you're right, Todd," Neil considered. "We best hop back on the bike then."

Todd stared up at Neil, puzzled. Neil smiled, reaching his arm out past the boy and knocking at the door—three times, the taps of his knuckles clean and crisp and wooden as they resounded around the yard. Todd made a small yelp as the door, only a few moments after Neil's knocking, was suddenly (and violently*) yanked open.*

Neil stepped into his room, gently curling the knob behind him and pressing the door shut with a soft click. He spun around, already shrugging off his bag with one, suave movement, when he paused.

Well, he thought. *This is convenient.*

"Hi guys!" he announced, letting his bag slip off of his hand. It hit the floor with a cottony thud.

Five pairs of eyes shot up towards him. One, sprawled across the bed opposite Neil's, posed with a cigarette between the teeth beneath it. Two, both huddled near the far wall, their attached hands held out to the radiator. Another, at Neil's desk again, this time with the chair spun the proper way round, pages of equations spread out before it. And the last, hovering awkwardly over the previous pair's shoulder, pointing at the aforementioned pages of equations with a sharpened pencil.

"What's… going on?"

"Neil!" Charlie chirped, sitting up on the creaking bedsprings with a jolt. "Hey! How'd it go?"

Neil pulled at the sleeves of his blazer, shucking it off with a smile. "How'd what go?"

“Funny,” Charlie snarked, hopping off of the bed, leaving the sheets and pillow dishevelled behind him. “*Rehearsals*, Neil. How’d *rehearsals* go?”

“Oh, right,” Neil said. He beamed. “*Terribly*.” Then he fussed among himself, scooping up his bag off the ground and prancing towards his wardrobe.

“What?” came Charlie’s response, the boy himself now blocked from Neil’s periphery by the opened wardrobe door.

Neil merely hummed, slipping his blazer back onto one of the wooden coat hangers. “As I said,” he clarified peppily, sticking his head out for a brief second. “It went terribly.”

Charlie made a face. A strange blend of confusion, incredulity, and with just a hint of scepticism brushed over the top. Meeks and Pitts were having similar reactions from their perch near the radiator, as well as Cameron from over Knox’s shoulder—though he did his best to hide it. Knox, meanwhile, had twisted his body around, away from his trigonometry homework, and propped up an elbow on the back of the chair. His hand was placed such that his expression was rendered unreadable.

“But you’re smiling—” Pitts pointed out, head tilted to the side.

“And you’ve got a dopey look on your face—” Meeks supplied.

“—it’s more *dreamy* than *dopey*—” Cameron corrected.

“—so that means it didn’t *really* go terribly, right?” Pitts queried.

Neil's smile curled tellingly at the edges. "*Well*—"

"Remember, you made us wait hours for this, Perry," Charlie warned through his simper, waggling his pointer finger. "You better be pulling our damn legs."

Neil shrugged, unknotting his tie and shoving it—alongside his bag—into the wardrobe, which he pushed shut before turning back to the group. Charlie was leaning back on the wardrobe opposite, signature smirk gnarling at the edges. Meeks was falling in beside him attentively, while Pitts barely leaned forward—the boy maintaining his proximity to the heater as best he could. Cameron was wearing a hesitant side-eye, body only halfway turned, as if he was fighting his own curiosity. Knox was raising his brow almost invisibly.

"Well, the thing is," Neil declared, holding his hands out either side of him. as if he were presenting a show. "The thing is, with Ginny—"

Ginny.

Ginny, literally hopping on one foot*, didn't waste a single second.*

She'd barely wrenched open the door and exclaimed, "Oh thank God*," before she loped forward and tackled Todd into a fierce hug—and it* was *fierce, in all senses of the word. When she pulled back, her expression was… positively* incensed*. "You* idiot*!" she cried. "Do you have* any *idea how many times I tried calling you? But you wouldn't pick up! God, I had half a mind to march over to your house and—"*

"S-Sorry, sorry," Todd murmured. "I-I-I…"

“He was waiting outside of rehearsals, Ginny,” Neil explained, stepping forwards and placing a hand atop Todd’s shoulder. “He wouldn’t have gotten your calls.”

Ginny, finally registering Neil’s presence, startled. Her eyes idled on his hand on Todd’s shoulder before she recovered, glaring at his face, nostrils flaring with frustration. “I called as soon as I got home,” she argued. “A good half hour *before rehearsals finished, at least.”*

“I-I l-left early,” Todd supplied. Neil subtly squeezed the boy’s shoulder. “After that, I-I wasn’t s-sure you still wanted m-me over… I c-can leave, i-if you…?”

“Jesus Christ*,” Ginny cursed. She wrestled Todd back into another embrace, Neil removing his hand just in time to not be caught in the grapple. “You* idiot*, my God, what on earth would make you think—?” Her eyes snapped open in realisation, peering at Neil from over Todd’s shoulders in a silent question. Neil proffered her a tense, pained expression, which he hoped answered it. It must’ve, because her tone was softer and face more sympathetic when she pulled away this time. “Oh, Todd. Of course— Of course we want you here. My mom didn’t spend the afternoon baking a cake for nothing.”*

Todd’s eyes widened. “Wh-What?”

“It’s your birthday, of course we needed cake!” Ginny had resorted to leaning against the doorway for support, which made her head tilt slightly awkwardly. “You didn’t find it suspicious at all *when she asked you what flavours you liked last week? Or if you were allergic to anything?”*

“N-No… and you— She really d-didn’t have t-to—”

“Tell her that yourself,” Ginny cut in. “No, seriously, go tell her that— Mom and dad are worried sick *about you, come on, they’re in the kitchen!” She moved her hands in a frantic gesture.*

“O-Okay, okay,” Todd said, almost tripping over the foundation as he was fussed inside the house by Ginny. He quickly spun around before he disappeared into the hallway. “N-Neil?” he called back.

Neil looked up. “Yes?”

“Th-Thank you. Again. F-For everything.”

Neil couldn’t help the fond laugh that spilled out of him. “I was happy to help, Todd.”

Todd nodded, still a little dazed, but hurried on once Ginny had adequately swatted his sleeve enough times. Neil could only watch, stunned, as Todd simply vanished around the corner—his exit seemingly only having taken a split second.

“God, when I get my hands on his parents…” Ginny uttered, darkly, spinning back to Neil. She caught Neil’s expression and deflated, visibly. “Sorry I hurried him inside,” she said. “It’s just— My parents were genuinely *worried, and I— I was scared he might never come in if I didn’t* force *him.” She sighed. “It’s happened before.”*

Neil shrugged, pretending as if it wasn’t as large a deal as it was. Pretending as if he hadn’t had a few more words he’d have liked to share with the boy, or a few more topics he had to discuss, or something tucked away in his bag that he’d been intending on—

Well. It happens.

"It's all good," Neil replied. "I'm just glad he'll have a little grace*, now."*

Ginny stared up at the top of the doorframe in what looked like to be a bid to heaven. "As am I," she commiserated. "What, uh… What happened, if I may ask?"

Neil inhaled through his teeth. "He was outside the theatre, crying," he explained. "He, uh, he got a desk set *for his birthday, he… showed it to me, eventually."*

Ginny's nose scrunched. "Didn't he…?"

"…get one last year?" Neil finished. "He told me as much."

"Oh," Ginny said.

"Oh, indeed," Neil echoed, trying not to clench his fists at the memory. "The desk set's, um, properly disposed of *now," he added, in a slightly cheerier tone. "I'll let Todd tell you about it."*

Ginny sighed again, body drooping further down the doorway as her leg began to bend at the knee. "I… I can't thank you enough for what you did, Neil. Seriously. I owe you the world*."*

"Please, I was happy to help," Neil replied.

He didn't mention that it was all he could do, for treating Todd as he had before. For almost ignoring *the boy, again. He didn't mention that it still didn't feel as if it was close to enough to make up for it, that he should've done* more.

Instead, he lied, and said, "It was all I could to help."

"But you were there*, when I wasn't, and—" Ginny cut herself off, huffing out a breath that turned to clouds in the cold air. "Just,* thank you*, Neil. If there's anything you need—" She stopped, memory passing over her face. "You wanted to tell me something, didn't you? At rehearsals?"*

Neil deliberated for a second. "Yes," he confirmed, speaking slowly.

"Well— What was it?" Ginny asked, straightening herself up against the wall, leaning forward slightly. "Because I can assure you, if you ask for something, I'll give it. I meant what I said, Neil, I owe you the world *for bringing Todd back."*

"Right, yes, well…" Neil trailed off.

Ginny waited.

Neil made no attempt to finish. His gaze wandered behind her, to the mouth of the house—the one which had swallowed Todd not so long ago.

"And…?"

Neil forced his focus back on her, away from the afterimages of Todd still

burned in his mind.

Ginny was staring at him, the corners of her lips turned up. There was light trailing through her curls, eyes chocolate-brown and creased with the gratitude plain on her face. A slow breeze rolled through the street behind Neil—as if the world itself was holding its breath.

Neil swallowed, still staring into Ginny's eyes. He opened his mouth, already half-curled into a smile.

"I—"

"I didn't do it."

Charlie's face twisted, before he barked out a shallow laugh. "*What*?" he said, for the however-many'th time.

"I didn't do it," Neil repeated, rolling his shoulders in the tiniest of shrugs. "I didn't ask her out."

Charlie's jaw dropped, imperceptibly. "Well— Why the hell *not*?"

"She sprained her ankle during rehearsals," Neil explained, for the second time today. "Had to leave early. Anyway—"

"I'm *sorry*?"

"—so I was actually wondering if—"

“No, no.” Charlie held up his hand, waving it in Neil’s face. “Let’s turn back a couple pages— She sprained her *ankle*?”

Neil nodded. “She tripped over a donkey’s head,” he provided. “But —”

“She tripped over a *what*—?” Charlie balked.

“It’s a prop from the play,” Meeks inserted. “Puck transforms one of the mechanicals’ heads into an ass—”

“Shut up Meeks,” Charlie broke in, not even turning around.

“Yes sir.”

Charlie stared wildly at Neil. “So…?”

“So… what?” Neil replied.

“Why were you so late, then?” Charlie demanded. “If that was all, why didn’t you come back straight after rehearsals?” He narrowed his eyes. “What exactly did you spend the afternoon doing, exactly?”

Neil gulped.

“Nothing,” he answered. “It was nothing.”

“Oh,” Ginny replied.

Neil didn’t want to believe it, but it was almost as if she shrank a little with the word, her body slipping back down the doorframe an inch—as if she’d been standing on her tippy-toes, and had fallen back flat on her heels. She tapped idly against the opened door, eyes looking anywhere but Neil.

“Sorry, I just thought—” she cut herself off again, pinching her lips together.

“Hm?” Neil prompted.

Ginny smiled, a taut thing that didn’t reach her eyes. Her leg began to tremble under her with the effort of supporting her weight. “I just thought it might’ve been important. Clearly not.”

“Sorry,” Neil said, even if he wasn’t sure what he was apologising for. “I’ll, uh… I’ll leave you now. Don’t want to keep you hopping around all night.”

Ginny chuckled, wanly. “Yes, well. Think about it anyway, will you?”

“I will,” Neil promised. “But— About what, again?”

Ginny’s smile tightened. “Never mind then.” She pulled herself up from the bent-over position she’d been falling into for the past however long, looking close to buckling over. “Thanks again, Neil, for bringing Todd back.”

“You’re welcome,” Neil replied. “Could you… could you actually tell him goodbye, for me? I didn’t really get the chance to say.”

“Of course,” Ginny responded, curtly. “I’ll… I’ll see you at the next rehearsals, okay?”

“Thank you,” Neil breathed. “See you at the next rehearsals. Take care.”

“You too,” Ginny sighed, staring at Neil for just a second too long, streetlights caught in her irises. Then she hopped backwards, pushing the door shut, leaving Neil blinking at the sudden darkness in front of him. He couldn’t help but feel as if he’d just done something wrong—

Should he have done it? *He’d considered it, but... It just hadn’t seemed right, not after the day they’d both been through. But Ginny’s tone, and her words, and her disappointment…*

Neil sighed. It was time to get going, anyway. He spun on his heel, back towards his bike, and resigned himself to a long cycle home—the whole while he’d probably spend wondering whether he was an idiot or not.

“Neil Perry,” Charlie deadpanned. “You are, without a doubt, an *idiot*.”

“*What*?” Neil defended. “It was the least I could do!”

“You invited your friend from the play, *Adam what’s-his-name*, to you and Ginny’s next kind-of date,” Charlie reiterated. “How are you *not* an idiot for doing that?”

“He was struggling!” Neil retorted, sitting back on top of his bed. “I was trying to be a good friend.”

Charlie, who had settled back down on the mattress opposite, folded his hands over his knees as he rolled his eyes. His cigarette had been stomped underfoot and kicked between Neil’s feet about halfway through Neil’s retelling of his after-rehearsal happenstances, but the smell of smoke still clung in the air.

“What about being a good friend to *me*, Neil?” Charlie whined. “I asked you to do *one* thing. Instead, you spent the afternoon throwing away your next best shot at asking Ginny out, as well as…” He waved his hand in a circle. “What was it? Oh, that’s right— Helping out the guy who, for a good few months, was the guy we thought was *dating* her.”

“But he *wasn’t* dating her,” Neil snapped. “And it was his *birthday*, he was *crying*, and his name is *Todd*—”

“Yes, yes,” Charlie groaned. “I don’t have anything against him, Neil, just making a point.”

Neil sunk a little further back into his bed, kicking his legs as they dangled over the edge of the frame. His previous happiness had fossilised into a sort of nervousness—not helped by all the poets gathered around him, their keenness for the day’s events obvious in their eyes. Well, most of their eyes—Knox still had that undecipherable squint, set above the hand still blocking any view of his mouth. Somehow, this only made Neil’s anxiety worse.

But he *did* have something he needed to say, a question he still needed to ask—and tonight was as good a time as any.

“You know,” Neil began, “I dropped off Todd at the Danburry’s afterwards, so that he could have dinner there.”

“Oh, really? *Fascinating*,” Charlie drawled. He fell back onto his haunches, head lolling with exhaustion. But then he stopped, gaze darting back to Neil. “Wait, really?”

Neil nodded. “It was all he was doing for his birthday really, which, you know. So—”

“Oh,” Charlie butted in, something menacingly alike to realisation beginning to blossom on his face. “*Oh*.” Then he *grinned*, a Cheshire grin which needled at Neil’s stomach. “Wait, no— I understand what’s going on here.”

Neil watched him warily. “You… do?”

“Yes,” Charlie said, clapping his hands and exchanging looks between the rest of the boys. (Well, most of the boys. Knox’s focus remained locked onto Neil.) “It all makes sense now,” Charlie continued, rubbing his palms together, smirk slipping back onto his face. “Why you chose to miss dinner, why you were so happy when you walked in, why you’ve been *misleading us* all along.” He pointed accusatorily at Neil, who flinched—sweating a little under his shirt at the indictment.

“R-Really?” Neil stammered.

“Yep,” Charlie purred, grinning smugly. “It was all because of—”

Todd. *Neil was still thinking on him, while he meandered back to where*

he'd parked the bike. Specifically, what it all meant—what it meant that Neil had helped him, given him a ride across town, let him dig his fingers into Neil's shoulders and lay his chest on the small of Neil's back. What it meant that once Neil had allowed himself to pay his fullest attention to Todd, had opened those floodgates, he couldn't stop thinking about every memory of the boy he had. What it meant that it had stung a little for Todd to be so quickly whisked away once they'd reached their destination.

He was still lost in his thoughts when he heard it. A few muttered words in a quiet voice, a gentle swinging of hinges, the tapping of a shoes cutting through the stilled night air—the sound growing louder as they approached. Neil paused where he was, refusing to look back, refusing to raise his hopes. Not until the footsteps stopped, right behind where he'd stopped on the pathway, standing in the middle of the white spot cast by the streetlight above.

"N-Neil?"

The voice wheedled its way over Neil's body, like a clear, cool breeze cutting through a lazy summer heat, unlodging his shoulders and eliciting a foggy breath from between his lips. Neil turned around, and there he was—sandy-blonde hair and powder blue eyes, panting slightly from his run past the Danburry's' manicured hedges.

"Todd," Neil said.

Todd looked up, mouth curling into a smile. Then he shuffled his hand into his pocket, before producing a crumpled square of cloth which appeared periwinkle in the artificial lighting. He offered it out, sheepishly, to Neil.

"I believe this is y-yours?"

Neil was taken aback, pausing for a second. Then he burst out laughing,

gratefully snatching back the volunteered handkerchief, enjoying how Todd smiled at the action. In all honesty, he would've let Todd keep it, but really —when had he ever been good at telling the boy no*?*

"Thanks," he breathed, ignoring how soft his voice had become. "I, uh— I likely wouldn't have remembered otherwise."

"Yeah, well…" Todd grinned down at the illuminated pavement. "I only realised when I f-felt it in my pocket in the kitchen. And you were already l-leaving when I came back into the hallway, and Ginny was hopping back t-to the couch when I asked her…"

"I've got it now," Neil affirmed. "That's what matters."

"Yeah…" Todd trailed off, beginning to fiddle with his fingers.

The two stood in silence for a beat, until Neil spoke up. "Todd?"

Todd's head tilted up, though his eyes still avoided Neil's. "Yes?"

"Was there something else you wanted to tell me?" Neil asked, taking a single, cautious step forwards.

"M-Maybe," Todd answered, still stammering away to the side.

"Well?" Neil poked, taking another step towards him. "What was it?"

Todd looked up. He broke into a helpless grin, closing the gap between

them with one final step, wrapping his arms around Neil and pulling him into a—

Neil's mind blanked.

He was, somehow, reminded of Meeks and Pitts' hi-fi system. Specifically, one moment when they'd installed the input wire incorrectly; they'd overloaded it, causing it to crackle, zap, and set a patch of carpet alight. It had taken a hastily dropped textbook and several panicked stomps before the small blaze was extinguished—only leaving behind a small black mark on the floor, the smell of smouldering dust in the air, and the argument Cameron had with Charlie afterwards about using his *textbook as the makeshift fire-blanket, when Charlie had had to reach over the whole length of the table to grab it. Ruined, shoe-printed textbooks aside, Meeks and Pitts had both said afterwards that all were lucky that it was only a single wire—an overloading of the entire system would've caused the makeshift electrical work to simply combust.*

Now, Neil was reminded of this because that described combustion—or something akin to it—was what was currently happening to his brain as Todd held him in the embrace. Neil's skull, completely fried by the act of affection, was hissing and sizzling and sending bright sprays of sparks out into the night.

(Much like how he imagined the hi-fi system would've done had all of its wires been overloaded. Hence, the connection.)

Neil raised his hands oh-so hesitantly, slowly snaking them around Todd's torso. Todd responded by burying himself further into the crook of Neil's neck, causing Neil's breath to hitch. He could feel the boy's hair brush against his ear, the collar of his sweater scratching at Neil's neck, Todd's breath warm through the fabric covering Neil's shoulder. The sensation was scolding, adrenalising, while simultaneously it felt so horridly correct—

“Thank you,” Todd mumbled, before pulling away. Which, though Neil immediately missed the contact, was likely for the best—a few more seconds and Neil didn’t doubt that he, just like the unfortunate piece of Welton floor, would catch on fire.

Now only a short distance away, Neil could see Todd’s face was red from scraping against Neil’s blazer. Neil was mightily jealous. At least Todd had an excuse for why his face was so flushed, unlike Neil, who could only hope that the white of the streetlight washed out any of the pink burning on his face.

“Really, Todd,” Neil whispered. “I was happy to help.”

“Yeah,” Todd replied. “I just wanted… to let you know. B-Before you left.”

“I’m glad you did, actually,” Neil agreed. “Because I had something I wanted to give you, as well.”

He reluctantly wrangled his way out of Todd’s arms, stiffly walking over to the bike, handkerchief in hand. He picked at the fastening of his satchel, slipping in the baby-blue cloth before rummaging around through the bag’s contents. He’d had the idea on the ride over, but hadn’t been sure enough about it to mention it—now, he couldn’t not *go along with it. He felt his hands wrap around a familiar, crinkly paper, and grinned as wide as his face would allow.*

“I know it’s not nearly as impressive as another desk set,” he began, pulling out his prize and presenting it to Todd. “But here. Don’t throw these off of a bridge, alright?”

Todd, slowly and carefully, reached out to take Neil’s offer. He laughed quietly, fondly, short puffs of cloud coming out through his smile—like the whisper of wind tracing over freshly settled snow.

“Now go on,” Neil urged, stepping back, booting the kickstand until it gave, letting the bike fall into his hands. “There’s cake for you, I heard.”

“Stay.”

Neil was caught off guard. He realised why a second later—this, quite possibly, was the most certain he had ever heard Todd be.

“Stay?” he echoed.

“Stay,” Todd reaffirmed. “Please.”

In a rare reversal of roles, Neil was the one of the two who was avoiding eye contact. “I’m… really sorry, Todd, but… I can’t. I had to be back at Welton at least an hour ago.”

“Oh.” Todd’s tone wavered on the drawn-out syllable, falling at its end. Neil winced. “I-It’s f-fine, r-r-really, I m-mean— Y-You’ve a-already done s-so much for m-me, I d-don’t want t-to—”

*Neil glanced up, catching Todd in the act of folding back in on himself. “*Todd*,” he called.*

Todd met his eyes, and Neil chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“You asked her out at the house!” Charlie crowed, slapping his hands on his thighs as he declared it. “That’s what you’ve been hiding all

this time!" Charlie clicked his tongue. "Oh, so *that's* what you were trying to tell us—but you couldn't get it out."

"I was *trying* to get it out," Neil remarked. "*You* were interrupting me —"

"Don't think I was," Charlie interrupted. "And don't worry, I figured it out. Right?" He stared up at Neil. "That's what it was, right?"

Neil grimaced, brow furrowing and eyes wrinkling. "Not exactly *asked out*," he corrected, retreating a little further back onto his own bed. "And not exactly… *Ginny*."

Charlie made a face as if Neil had hit him. It was Knox, then, who spoke up next.

"So, Neil," the boy said, draping his forearm limply over the back of the chair, hand finally falling away from his face. Neil could now see the boy's full expression—Knox was *smiling*. Soft, and strangely reassuring. "What *did* you do?"

Neil shouldn't do it. He really, really shouldn't. There were a million ways for it to go wrong.

But what a shame*, he thought. What a shame, that Todd was doing so little for his birthday. And Neil couldn't stay, not now, he couldn't. But Todd had had such a rotten birthday, and it wasn't* enough*. And Neil* wanted *to stay, so terribly that it ached—Neil realised, alarmingly, that this was the* only *thing he wanted now, now that he'd allowed himself to want it. Time spent with Todd, besides Todd, laughing with him, exchanging stories, and—*

God*, what a shame, that Todd was doing so* little f*or his birthday. After so many tears, after however much rejection and abuse and whatever else Todd had faced it was only dinner and a cake, and it wasn't* enough*, and* —

And Neil looked up and he saw him. Todd Anderson, haloed by the light pouring downwards, hands clasped around a bundle of slightly squashed purple flowers pilfered from Welton's very own gardens, and God—

Neil couldn't have kept his next words from tumbling out of his mouth if he wanted to.

"You *didn't*," Charlie hissed, lowly, eyes fully narrowed.

Neil gave a weak smile, looking between the other poets. Meeks and Pitts were looking at each other, but ultimately shrugged. Cameron seemed apprehensive of the idea, but could see no obvious way it would get any of them in trouble (in trouble with *Charlie* notwithstanding). And Knox—

Knox was still smiling, soft as silk at the edges, a sympathetic something swimming in his eyes.

"I think it's a great idea, Neil," he said. "If that's what you want."

Neil nodded.

Charlie scoffed. "Really, Knoxious? You *agree* with this?" he squawked. "It's—! It's—! It's gotta be against *some* rule—"

“Because you care about *rules*, Dalton?” Knox countered.

Charlie, revealingly, fell silent.

“Right, so we’re agreed?” Neil said, finally finding that he was able to breathe again.

“Seems so,” Knox mused, eyes now fixed into a hard stare, focused in on Charlie. Neil looked between the other boys, who all nodded.

“*Fine*,” Charlie relented, voice a harsh rasp that he spat in Knox’s direction.

“Right,” Neil confirmed, heart racing. He’d *done* it. “We’ll figure out the details tomorrow—”

He was cut off as the door swung open, revealing Neil’s roommate, shocked expression on his face—presumably from opening the door to find sextuple the amount of boys he was expecting. His attention immediately locked onto Charlie, who was still sat atop his bed.

“You!”

Charlie sat up sharply. “Oh, don’t *bother*,” he replied, voice scathingly flat. “We were done, anyway.” Then he stalked away, barrelling past Neil’s roommate, who was still standing in the doorway. Charlie hit his shoulder on his way through, but Neil’s roommate seemed too surprised to say anything.

The rest of the poets soon followed suit, filing out one-by-one. None as… enthusiastically as Charlie, with each only quietly wishing Neil a goodnight before taking their exit. Knox, specifically, pushed Neil's chair in with a wooden squeak, gathered up all of his books, and leaned in close to Neil before he left.

"Don't worry about Dalton," he said. "He'll be over it by tomorrow." He stood back up, turned towards the exit. "Goodnight, Neil."

"Night, Knox."

Then Neil fell backwards onto the bed, barely able to contain his nerves. He stood up brusquely, dusting himself off, and went to fetch his pyjamas from his wardrobe.

"Do I want to know what that was all about?" his roommate asked, mirroring Neil's actions—depositing his bag, shucking his blazer, pulling out pyjamas.

"Not really," Neil hummed, beginning to make his way out to the bathroom. He stopped, seeing his roommate's open wardrobe. "Hey, are you using that?"

His roommate looked around, confusedly. "What, this?" he asked, pulling out his duffle coat.

"Yes, that."

Neil's roommate furrowed his brow. "Uh… no?"

“Can I borrow it, then?”

“What, *now*?” his roommate questioned.

“Oh, not *now*,” Neil corrected, “later this week, though.”

“Got a specific time?”

Neil smiled.

“Friday night,” Neil blurted.

“What?”

“Are you free. Friday night,” Neil continued, hands tapping against the bike’s handlebars. “I can’t stay now*, but… me and my friends have a… thing, every Friday. You should come.”*

“A… thing*?” Todd wondered aloud.*

“I think you’d like it,” Neil rambled. “Maybe, it’s like— Well, mostly we just sit around a cave talking. But we also take turns… reading poetry*.” Neil flitted his eyes away, a slight guilt pulsing in his chest. He saw though, out of the corner of his eye, Todd perk up. “I know it sounds kind of dumb, but—”*

“It doesn’t sound d-dumb,” Todd cut in. “And w-well, you know I… l-like p-poetry.”

The guilt rose up from Neil's chest into his throat, strangling him like a noose. But Todd was grinning, electric in the light, and his eyes melted when he looked up at Neil.

"It's j-just…"

"Just what?" Neil choked.

"I d-don't know your friends, and I don't want it to b-be awkward…" Todd admitted. "P-Plus, you said you all take turns reading poetry, and I— I c-can't do that."

"What if you didn't have to?" Neil responded, too quickly. "And it won't be awkward, trust me." He laughed, stiffly. "It's not like I'm bringing a girl *to the meeting."*

"Meeting*?" Todd repeated, deliberately, as if tasting the word in his mouth.*

"Yes, Todd," Neil enunciated. "A meeting— Of the Dead Poets Society*." He whispered the last part, as if he was telling Todd a secret—which, technically, he was. It made his heart pound in his chest to say it.*

"Well, I have to admit…" Todd's grin curled impossibly further upwards. "That s-sounds intriguing*."*

"So you'll come?" Neil asked.

Todd chewed on his lips.

"I promise— You don't have to read if you don't want to, you don't have to do anything— Hell*, you could just show up and do nothing in the corner." Neil exhaled slowly, almost a whistle. "But I want you there, alright?"*

Todd still looked doubtful. "Neil, I— I w-want to, but— I mean, what are you g-gonna do, ask all your friends to…?"

"I will," Neil vowed. "I'll ask them tonight! Or tomorrow. Trust me, Todd, I'm going to get you into that meeting, okay?"

Todd sighed. Then he laughed, eyes crinkling as he stared up at Neil. "O-Okay," he said, finally.

"You're coming?"

Todd nodded shyly.

"Keen," Neil muttered, slightly breathless. "Keen, keen, keen— I'll, uh, be in contact with Ginny, yeah? I'll let you know when to— What to do. It'll be great, alright Todd?"

"I trust you," Todd said, and—if Neil's heartrate hadn't been doing flips before, it sure as hell was now*. Neil climbed onto his bike, hoping the expression on his face of pure, unadulterated fondness wasn't as obvious in the dark.*

“I best be off, then.” Neil wheeled around, taking one last look at Todd. “I’ll see you Friday, alright?”

“See you Friday, Neil.”

Neil savoured the sight for a second more, and then began cycling away.

Neil’s heart was hammering in his throat as he cycled back to Welton, racing beneath the glittering stars hung in the black sky above. He let out a laugh, simply because he could, as he trundled his way through the gates of Welton, smiling helplessly up into the yawning sea of beacons above. He was weightless, he was flying, he was thinking.

Thinking—

That they were going to need another duffle coat.

Chapter End Notes

thats a wrap on this god awful chapter jesus christ i was literally FIGHTING this thing all week. hence the sunday upload... anyway. hope you enjoyed this almost 8k word monstrosity. thank you everyone who kudos and comment or even just read like thanks for being here :)))))))

chapter title is from slow dance. im going to bed now. gn

We Can Go Wherever We Want

Chapter Summary

Neil has to deal with his three worst enemies; an annoyed Charlie, studying history, and... the dark.

Chapter Notes

chapter title from "Terrapin" and important update in end notes :)

also shoutout my highschool phys sci class for teaching me how titrations work (hopefully the chapter isnt too confusing if you dont know what that is)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was chemistry the next day, and Knox had been proven wrong. Charlie was absolutely *not* over it.

“I still can’t believe it,” he muttered.

“*Charlie*,” Neil begged.

“Focus on the titration, you two,” Cameron chimed in, causing Charlie to spin around.

“I *can’t*, Richard,” he lamented. “I’m too busy focusing on Neil being a total and utter *ass*!”

Neil sighed, following Cameron’s advice and flipping open his chemistry textbook. “*After setup, the valve is opened to allow base solution to slowly drip into the beaker of acid*,” Neil read aloud, as the two boys squabbled behind him. Scanning the printed diagram, Neil fiddled with what looked to be the ‘valve’—and was rewarded with a steady trickle of solution, splashing out of the suspended tube and into

the beaker below. "*The base solution is added carefully, as there need only be enough to neutralise the acid—and no more. Otherwise, the calculated concentration of the acid will be inaccurate.*"

Cameron tutted, waving the other boy away as Charlie whirled back to Neil.

"I can't believe it," he said again. "I get you to promise me one thing —"

Neil rolled his eyes, tightening the valve back up a little, leaving only one slow-building drop cascading down at a time. "As if it's your thing to get me to promise—"

"—and this happens!" Charlie raised his fingers to his face, massaging circles into his temples. "By *God*, you're going to kill me with your idiocy…"

"With any luck," Neil murmured.

"*What was that*?"

"I said I *tried*, Charlie," Neil huffed, standing up and away from the experiment. "It just wasn't the right time— *I'm* not upset about it. I don't know why *you* are."

"But it was the right time to invite old what's-his-name over to one of your *private* meetups?" Charlie accused. "And what do we do with *this*?" He held up the small, brown-glass bottle they'd been supplied with.

Neil guided his finger along the textbook page, catching up to where he'd left off. "*Next, an indicator solution is added. This causes the acid to change colour once the correct amount of base solution has been added*." Charlie unstoppered the bottle, squeezing a couple drops into the beaker. "*Continue adding base solution slowly, until the* very lightest *colour change is detected*," Neil continued. Then he slammed the book shut. "And you know his damn *name*, Charlie."

"Whatever," Charlie replied, snapping the lid of the bottle back on.

Neil drummed his fingers on the table, matching the rhythm of the droplets falling out of the tube. "I told you— He was struggling. He's my friend. I just wanted to *help*."

"And *I* told *you*," Charlie sneered, reaching forward to loosen the valve further, speeding up the beat of the splashes. "I've been your friend longer. And there *had* to be other ways to help!"

"Jesus, Charlie, it's not like it's going to happen *forever*," Neil tried, leaning against the counter. "It's only a… *momentary* arrangement."

"Momentary is still too much," Charlie insisted as Neil twisted the valve back, slowing the drips down once more.

Then he spun on his heel. "Are we still talking about Adam?"

"Not sure, Perry," Charlie drawled. "*Have* we been talking about Adam this whole time?" He pushed past Neil again, taking control of the valve—spinning it to the point when the base solution was practically streaming out.

“Slow down, Charlie—” Neil warned, stretching his hand forwards but having it slapped away by Charlie.

“Sometimes, Neil,” Charlie lectured, “you have to act with a bit of *haste* if you want to get what you want.”

Neil groaned. “So I made a couple *mistakes*. Big deal.” He straightened himself up, helpfully pulling himself to a height above Charlie’s. “But I stand by them—I’m not going to cancel on Adam. And I’m not going to cancel on Todd, either.”

Charlie fumbled with the valve, loosening it even further. “I don’t think you understand the concept of a *secret* society, Neil—”

“Do you honestly think that Todd’s going to fink on us, Charlie?” Neil asked, indignant.

“You could’ve asked us before you invited him, is all I’m saying—”

“I asked you as soon as I got back—”

“Well, you should’ve done it before!”

Behind Charlie, having neutralised, the once-transparent acid solution changed colour. *Much* too fast—it deepened quickly from the desired lighter shade, directly into an embarrassingly saturated indigo.

“Shit!” Neil exclaimed, shouldering his way past to crank off the valve. Then he stared down at the uselessly purpled beaker, rippling from the last drops still dribbling down from the tube. He didn’t even bother to see how much base solution they’d used—it was so obviously over the amount it had *actually* taken to neutralise the acid that it didn’t matter. They’d just have to start over.

“I’ll get some new acid,” Charlie mumbled behind him, shuffling his shoes against the floor.

Neil grasped at the sleeve of the other boy’s lab coat. “Charlie.”

Charlie groaned, theatrically. “*What.*”

Neil turned briskly, causing Charlie to flinch under the bunched material clasped in his hands.

“Oh, don’t give me *that* look—” Charlie scoffed.

“*Charlie*,” Neil said again, firmer than last time. “What’s your problem? Really?”

“My problem is you distracted me,” Charlie answered, trying to tug away from Neil’s grip. “So I couldn’t see the beaker—”

“Not *that*,” Neil retorted, tone quieting to a stiff whisper. “I’ve explained what’s happening tomorrow to *every other poet* and they’ve all been fine with it. But I try it with you, and…” Neil trailed off, gesturing towards their thoroughly botched titration. “So what’s—”

"*Every other poet*?" Charlie hissed, rigidifying under Neil's hand. "And they were *all* okay with this?"

Neil's eyes creased in confusion. "You… you were *there* last night, Charlie."

Charlie turned away. "Damn right, I was *there*," he spat.

Neil tried meeting Charlie's look, but the other boy was fervently avoiding eye contact. "Just— What's going on, Charlie?" Neil asked, hating the whine that was creeping into his tone. "You can't seriously care this much about *Todd*—"

"Damnit, Neil!" Charlie cut in. "It's not all about your precious *Todd*, alright?"

Neil released the balled-up fabric in his fist. Charlie fell away limply, but didn't make any further movements away—he only bundled his arms around himself, glower on his face.

"What is it about, then?" Neil pressed.

Charlie laughed, dry and bitter. "It's just—" His voice dipped. "It's like he doesn't care at all, you know?"

Neil tilted his head, puzzled. "Sorry, who?"

Charlie peered over his shoulder, checked both of his flanks, then approached Neil. "*Knox*," he whispered.

“Oh,” Neil whispered back. “What… about him? Did something happen between you two?”

“No, Neil, absolutely *nothing’s* happened,” Charlie answered, mirthlessly. “He’s just… *head-over-heels madly in love* with someone and hasn’t deigned to tell anyone who it is.” He shook his head. “And before you ask, *no*, the only other thing I pester him about—you and Ginny—is going nowhere, either.” Charlie exhaled sharply through his teeth, looking up at Neil with challenge in his eyes. “So why would *anything* happen between us?”

Neil stepped back, just a little. “You two just— You two seemed so close, only a week ago. You coordinated, *yesterday*, to smuggle flowers into my bag.”

“All for you to give them to the wrong person,” Charlie jeered. Then his face slid right back into a frown. “And it didn’t matter, anyway— That afternoon, right after, he went off to find *Stick*. Bloody *Stick*, didn’t even wait a *second*. It’s like…” Charlie sighed. “It’s like he finds it *difficult* talking to me.”

“He doesn’t, Charlie,” Neil assured him, hesitantly placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder—a hand that was subsequently, and callously, rolled off. “Weren’t you two getting close? Scheming together?”

“That’s the thing, Neil,” Charlie stated, voice devoid of humour. “*I* thought we were. But after last night— Well, clearly he doesn’t care that much about it all, does he?” Charlie threw up his hands, smiling resignedly. “He only cares about the girl he’s in damn love with. And certainly not with anything *I* have to say to him.”

“Charlie, you know that’s not true,” Neil said, leaning in closer.

“You know it *is*, Perry.” Then Charlie coughed, grabbing the beaker of acid and beginning to step away. “Should really get that acid, now…”

Charlie left, striding towards the front of the class. Neil busied himself with filling the suspended tube back up with base solution, fumbling with the clamps, filching the acid concentration results that Cameron and Spaz had gotten from their *successful* titration. All the while, he thought on what Charlie had said—

Neil had thought that Charlie and Knox were getting on alright. But now that he considered it, he realised the two had had more than their fair share prickly moments as of late—not like their usual, playful bickering, *hell*, they didn’t even argue openly anymore—there was simply a vast gap of silence that stretched between them, awkward and airy and tense as a bowstring, which was *much* worse. But after each one, they’d normally go right back to the way they were before, acting as if nothing was wrong.

Apparently, not this time.

“Charlie, I—” Neil started, once the boy came back with a beaker full of clear, unneutralised acid.

“Todd can come to the stupid meeting,” Charlie said at the same time.

Both boys stopped.

“What?”

Charlie set down the beaker, making a resounding, glassy clink against the tabletop. “I said—” He visibly gritted his teeth. “I don’t care if Todd comes to the stupid meeting, alright? If it’ll make you happy, if it’ll make him happy— Just do whatever. Okay?”

Neil nodded, wrapping his hands around the cool beaker and sliding it under the base solution tube. “Thanks.”

“Whatever.”

Neil turned the valve, letting the solution drip incrementally into the acid, slow as pitch. “I was going to say—”

“Just don’t, Neil,” Charlie interjected. “Just… *don’t*.”

Neil bit back his words. “Okay,” he said, backing off.

Charlie leant over the countertop, watching the spaced-out splashes of acid. He grabbed the indicator bottle again, unstoppered it, squeezed a single droplet into the beaker. “So…”

Neil rolled his head towards Charlie. “So…?”

Charlie pushed the lid back onto the bottle with a click. “What were you going to tell me? About your plans for tomorrow?” Charlie cocked his head to the side, smile lolling onto his face. “That I’m the *last* to know about?”

Neil paused, then his face broke out with a grin—and he excitedly

began his explanation.

It was simple, really. Neil couldn't have planned it any better if he'd tried.

Ginny's parents were out for the weekend. There was to be a *party* at the Danburry's, one Todd was invited to, but could not be convinced —under threat of death—to attend. Todd's parents, however, were not aware of this, and were all too happy to have their son stay over with his best friend for the Friday night. And if Todd slipped away for a couple hours, and returned at an hour considered unreasonable by most, well—it wasn't as if there were any *adults* waiting around to tell him off.

Like Neil had proudly proclaimed over the phone, to one still terribly couch-ridden Ginny—everything simply worked out.

"You're sure he's going to come?" Neil queried, once again speaking into the blocky receiver of the Welton student telephone.

"I'll drag him by the collar if I have to," came Ginny's response, crackling and staticky in Neil's ear, but making him smile like the devil anyway.

"Sorry that you missed rehearsals, today," Neil added. "I think the directors are, too— Your understudy is…"

"She's doing her best," Ginny said. "But, yes… I would've liked to be there. Dad said I'll only need a couple days more, and then it'll be alright."

“And we still have Sunday,” Neil reminded her.

“Yes,” Ginny answered, voice oddly distant-sounding. “We have Sunday.”

Neil paused. “Are you sure you don’t mind…?”

“No, Neil,” Ginny’s voice clarified through the speaker. “I agree—Adam *does* need the practice. I think it’ll be nice!” Then, so low and lost in the breaking signal Neil could barely make it out— “Not like the *two of us* were enough…”

Neil cleared his throat. “Alright, well… I’ll come pick Todd up in a couple hours,” he said into the wire. “Take care, Ginny. And enjoy the party!”

“Thanks Neil,” Ginny replied, voice tight. “I will. You… you take care, too.”

One heavy, metallic click, and the call was over. Neil replaced the phone on the wall, slumping over as he did, winding the cord further around his gloved fingers—he’d been telling the truth before, he *was* sorry that Ginny had missed rehearsals, that her ankle was taking longer to heal than they’d thought it would. Neil hated how dismayed her voice had sounded over the telephone, hated to think that it may have been due to more than just the inconvenience of her injury. That it may have been because of something *he’d* said, something *he’d* done.

Neil unstuck himself from the wall. He’d have Sunday to sort it out, he decided, as he began to lumber over to the dining hall. As much as he

hadn't minded skipping dinner earlier in the week, he wasn't about to make a habit of it—not that he could eat much. His stomach had felt filled with a nervous energy since a bit before rehearsals, a dizzying mixture of excitement and apprehension.

So Neil ended up picking at his food, spooning shallower and shallower bites of mashed potatoes into his mouth, only vaguely aware of the conversations happening around him—Charlie needling Spaz about having his utensils in the 'wrong hands', Knox animatedly trying to convince Stick to let him try on his glasses. Meeks and Cameron taunting Pitts by speaking entirely in Latin, something they'd been doing the whole afternoon and didn't seem to plan on quitting for a while. As Neil stole two muffins for later, wrapping them in napkins before surreptitiously squashing them into his pocket, he couldn't help but let his focus drift to his two friends across the table.

Knox and Charlie were sat next to each other, as they normally were. But now, Neil couldn't help but notice that it was as if they were saving a spot between them on the bench for a third student—there was a visible rift, both boys pushing themselves towards their own respective speaking partners, voices a little too loud and laughter a little too forced.

Neil squirrelled the information away, filing it in the same cabinet that held yesterday's conversation with Charlie.

"*Aeolus haec contra*, Neil?"

Neil turned, confusedly. "Sorry, come again?"

"I said, *are you alright, Neil*?" Meeks asked.

Neil blinked, brain too distracted to double check Meek's translation.

“I’m *fine*,” he answered, putting his spoon down, smiling over his thoughts. “Just… y’know, uh, *worried* that… they might’ve… found… the bike?”

“I’m sure they didn’t,” Meeks said. “The groundskeeper would have to be mad to check *under* the rowing shed.”

“The groundskeeper *is* mad,” Knox jutted in, having ultimately succeeded in his persuasion of Stick—if the circular glasses now posed on his nose was anything to go by, anyway. “Have you seen him? He looks like he’s killed people before.”

“Huh,” Meeks replied, casually spiking his peas onto the tines of his fork. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there were a couple bodies buried around Welton.”

Cameron, besides him, rolled his eyes. “*Ad quem*. There aren’t any bodies buried around Welton, you idiots.”

“True,” Neil agreed, as Knox raised his eyebrows at Cameron’s words. “They’d all be thrown in the lake, probably.”

Meeks laughed, but Knox blanched a little across the table. He opened his mouth to speak, but didn’t have the chance as Pitts butted into the conversation.

“Hey!” Pitts whined, betrayal in his tone as he glared at Meeks. “You speak English with them, but not me?”

Meeks grinned as he replied. “*Est locus in longo secessu, insula efficit portum*…”

“Goddamnit!” Pitts cried.

“*Non ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco*…” Cameron concurred, placing a studious fist under his chin. “…*arma virumque*.”

Pitts groaned, letting his face fall into his hands as the other two boys continued to torment him with strings of Latin.

“So.” Knox peered up at Neil, leaving the others to their game. His eyes were curious, searching, ringed by the rims of the glasses. “Looking forward to tonight?”

Neil chuckled. “Always,” he replied, turning away from Knox too quickly. He pushed away his barely-picked-at plate, sliding it over towards the boy to one over his right. “Pitts, do you want the rest of this?”

Pitts turned away from his debate with Meeks and Cameron (two thirds of which were happening in another language), and gratefully accepted Neil’s offer. “Cheers, Neil!”

“*Quippe, vetor fatis*,” Cameron muttered.

“*What did you call me*?”

Knox eyed the transaction warily, but when Neil met his gaze the other boy didn’t say anything. Neil stood up, stepping out from the bench. “I’m off,” he said. “Got an *early night* tonight, and I’ve got some study to finish before I *turn in*.” He threw in a wink, the picture of

perfect bedtime-obeying.

"See you *tomorrow*, then," Knox said, smiling slyly.

"*Quam minimum credula postero*," Meeks added.

The rest of the poets nodded and gave their own mischievous winks, thoroughly confusing poor Stick and Spaz—who shared a perplexed look between themselves. Neil left them to their befuddlement, scampering out of the dining hall and back to his room.

Once there, he spread out his history notes, sitting down for his task of memorising meaningless dates, battles, names. Resigning himself to rewriting all of the endless lines of information out in the empty leaves of his notebook, *ad nauseum*. (*Ugh*, Neil thought. Maybe Meeks and Cameron had been rubbing off on him a little—random Latin phrases kept popping up in his brain.)

But he couldn't focus. It was obvious in the way his leg bounced beneath the desk, his shoe tapping against the floorboards; in the way he stopped to sharpen his pencil over and over, carving off wood shavings with the honed edge of a pocketknife; in the way he couldn't help getting up and pacing around the room, staring out the window as the grounds of Welton had the colour bled out of them by the fall of night.

After an hour of nothing productive being done, Neil swept away his history books and busied himself instead with packing his bag for the night—it wasn't as if the essay on the American Civil War was *tomorrow*, he'd have time over the weekend to review his notes. So he undid the clasp of his satchel and emptied it out, replacing the contents as he saw fit.

He placed in the normal culprits; his English notebook, a box of matches, the copy of *Five Centuries of Verse*—Charlie had never let him forget the meeting when he'd somehow left *that* behind. He followed those with a flashlight, just as flickery as the other ones the poets used, but better than nothing. He also placed in the two, slightly-squashed muffins he'd secreted away from dinner, wrapping them in the newly-washed baby-blue handkerchief and stuffing them in a side pocket where they wouldn't be crushed any further.

Then Neil stood up, wondering if he'd forgotten anything.

Oh, he realised. *Of course!*

He stepped over to his roommate's wardrobe and threw open its doors, fetching his promised prize from therein.

With that, he was packed. Now he only had to wait—

And after that, Neil could only guess. The idea made his heart beat too fast, and he couldn't be certain if it was worry or enthusiasm—an unhealthy heap of both, most like.

Eventually, the call for curfew came through the door. Neil slid his bag away from view, began conducting the pretence of getting ready for bed. Brushed his teeth, made sure to be seen by Dr. Hager entering his room in his pyjamas. Let the lights click out once his roommate returned. Laid in bed for a little while, trying to hear his roommate's breath evening out over the racket of Neil's pulse hammering in his ears.

Once Neil could wait no longer, and felt as if he was going to burst if he stayed beneath the bedsheets too long, he finally sprang out—grabbed his satchel, snuck down the hallway. Held his breath all the

way until he was outside. Then, and only then, under the black yawn of the sky—

Neil was off.

Neil wasn't afraid of the dark. He knew this for a fact; he'd gone out enough times with the poets to meetings, deep in the foggy woods, wandering through the winding, moonless brush to *know* that he wasn't afraid of the dark. He'd even biked back to Welton on Todd's birthday perfectly dandily, and that trip had been done entirely under cover of night.

Still.

That didn't mean he was exactly thrilled waiting out on the street, hiding away from the bright spots of the streetlights, skulking in the shadows of this random street like a ghost. Trying not to tap his feet against the shadowed pavement, paranoid about any and every sound he was making. There were still lights on in some of the houses around, orange-glowing squares stark against the fabricky background of night. Neil ducked a little, pulled his hood a little farther over his face.

There was little reason for anyone to stare out of their window at this time of evening, to survey the scene with enough scrutiny to discern that there was a Welton student parked therein; there was even littler reason for them to subsequently call up the school and report the incident directly to Mr. Nolan himself. As unlikely as the scenario was, however, it still occupied Neil's thoughts—Neil, who felt as if he was sticking out like a sore thumb, tucked away in the blind side of an alley with his cloak and his bike.

(Because his bike *had* been there where he'd hidden it, under the rowing shed, when he'd checked. The mad-and-possibly-murder-happy groundskeeper *hadn't* found it, turns out.)

Neil stared down at his borrowed wristwatch once more, trying to make out the position and angle of the hands from moonlight alone—a task easier named than completed, due to the cloud cover that had rolled in overhead. Neil considered lighting the flashlight for a second so he could read the time—but he didn't dare. What if he accidentally sent the beam into one of the surrounding, still-lit windows? And lured out the people lurking behind the glass? And then they came up to him in their nightgowns, demanding to know why some Welton boy was out here shining flashlights into their houses at this hour, for God's sake—

Neil wasn't afraid of the dark. It wasn't the dark that was making him pick at the paint flaking off of the bar of his bike, catching flecks under his fingernail until he shook them off onto the pavement below. It wasn't the dark that was making him check both directions down the street again, swivelling on the ball of his feet—

Nothing. There was *nothing*. Nothing and nobody. Really—

How long did it take one hopelessly *brilliant* boy to show up?

What if he isn't coming? something treacherous hissed in Neil's ear. *What if his stay was disallowed by his parents, or he decided not to go ahead with it after all? What if he never wanted to come in the first place —*

Neil ground his teeth together. Todd would come, he reassured himself, as he bounced from one foot to another as noiselessly as he could manage. And if not, so what? He'd merely go back to the cave, they'd have their meeting as per usual, Charlie would probably be

ecstatic considering his past track record—oh, and Neil could brag to all the others how easy all of *this* was.

This being stuffing one of the Welton bikes away in a hiding spot, to fetch later that day. Cycling it all the way through the Welton grounds, right up to the small lapse in the fence where it met the lake, just wide enough for him to ride through. Neil considered *that* a level above simply sneaking across the school campus; tiptoeing through hallways, hucking treats at the guard dogs, sprinting from Welton proper to the woods across naked ground—it all seemed so much less risky as compared to creaking a bicycle all the way through a sleeping town, loitering out on the street, kicking around in partial view of every damn residence around him as he *waited*.

And that added risk—*that* was why Neil was feeling his pulse pick up, feeling his blood freeze, feeling his head swell with growing unease. Why he cursed softly under his breath as more paint flecks scratched at the quick under his nail, why he began to frantically flick his eyes between every single lit window, why his breath was beginning to come out in quick drags of not-enough-oxygen as he attempted to shrink against the wall.

Neil wasn't scared of the dark. Not a little bit. He was just a little jumpy waiting for—

"Hey."

Neil *yelped*.

"Sorry!" Todd immediately squeaked.

Neil placed a hand over his heart, which he could feel jackrabbiting even through all of the many layers of clothing he was wearing. He let

out a breathy exhale, twisting around to the direction of the voice.

"No, I'm sorry, it's just—" Neil stopped, caught off guard by Todd's appearance—wrapped up in one of his sweaters, hands tucked under his armpits, smile small and sweet despite his clicking teeth. Neil lost his tongue for a second. "You, uh—" he recovered, "You frightened me."

He then began searching the lit windows around them, looking to see if any of the nearby homeowners had been alerted by his loud (and frankly embarrassing) cry. (It was definitely *not* because looking at Todd, cheeks flushed from the cold and features softened in the diffused starlight, was making it impossible for Neil's mouth to form words.)

Once he secured that the coast was clear, and he wasn't about to be accosted by an old, pyjamaed couple, he distracted himself further by pulling out the bunched-up material stuffed messily into the basket of his bike—too large, as it had turned out, to fit in his bag.

"So, uh, make it here alright?" Neil asked, in what he hoped sounded convincingly casual.

"Easy e-enough," Todd replied.

"Annoying that I couldn't just roll up to the Danburry's' house itself," Neil remarked, unpicking loops of stray fabric from where it had caught on the metal bars which made up the basket. "Would've been easier."

"Chet probably wouldn't h-have appreciated it," Todd muttered. "Probably would've thought you were t-trying to crash his party."

Neil pulled the bundle free, folding it and draping it over his arm as he laughed. “Probably.” He extended his hand out to Todd, offering out the dark cloth weighing it down. “Here,” he said. “So— Y’know, you don’t get cold.”

“Oh,” Todd responded. “Are… y-you sure?”

Neil pretended to be distracted staring at the windows again, a few of which seemed to have flickered out. “Of course. Now quick, we’re going to be late.”

The weight on his arm was lifted, followed by a mumbled “thanks,” before Neil’s ears picked up a shuffling of material and the threading through of wooden toggles. It was then that Neil allowed himself to look back at Todd—hoping that the added garment would grant him the ability to perceive Todd *without* having to bite the inside of his cheek.

Neil whined, in the back of his throat, to see that it hadn’t helped *at all*.

Neil had chosen his roommate as the best candidate for donating his duffle coat due to the boy’s plain disinterest; he didn’t bother to ask questions, ever, even about why Neil needed his coat for Friday night and Friday night *only*.

What Neil had failed to consider, however, too busy caught up in the idea of Todd shivering all night long, was that Neil’s roommate was… *tall*. And, in retrospect, maybe not the best size match for Todd, who —despite being sort-of tall himself—wasn’t nearly as stocky.

Which was a problem *now* because seeing Todd draped in the slightly oversized duffle coat—the sleeves coming up to the folds of his fingers, the neck of the hood gathering about his shoulders and framing his face, the way that it made Todd look so cozied and wrapped up and warm—was threatening to overload Neil's brain for the second time this week. Neil coughed, spinning back to the bike, clambering onto it before he was caught staring overlong.

"Let's not keep everyone waiting, hm?" Neil called behind him, not a little desperate to have Todd in the one position where he wasn't visible.

Todd's footsteps were shy and soft as he approached, hesitating for a second.

Neil looked back at Todd long enough to flash a smile over his shoulder. "Haven't forgotten *how* in the last couple days, have you?" Neil teased.

Todd smiled back. "I r-remember." Then he, too, climbed on the bike, resting his hands on Neil's shoulders once again.

Neil ignored the burning spots sprouting up under his own duffel coat, turning back to the street. "Then let's go!" he announced, beginning to pedal them through the town—with only the bright bulbs of the streetlights to guide them.

Now that Neil had some more experience riding tandem, he was a little more confident in engaging his passenger in conversation while he cycled—especially now that said passenger's distractingly endearing face was so helpfully out of Neil's cone of vision.

"So," Neil started. "Ginny wasn't *too* harsh on you, right?"

He heard Todd sigh breathily behind him. “I— I think she t-told me at one point that it was either you, or I h-had to hang out with Chet’s friends at the party.”

“Yikes,” Neil replied. “Sorry. I might’ve told her over the phone to remind you— I didn’t mean for her to *threaten* you.”

“She d-didn’t. Not *really*,” Todd hummed. “She was just… v-very fiercely encouraging me n-not to back out last minute.” He swallowed. “I may have d-done it before, to her…”

“Did you want to?” Neil asked.

“D-Did I want t-to…?” Todd repeated back, confused.

Neil let the handlebars dig into the palms of his hands, let the low wind trace over his face, the pit of his stomach drop. “Did you want to back out? I… I don’t want you to feel as I’m forcing you to come, Todd.”

“N-Neil—”

“Because if you’ve changed your mind, that’s fine, I don’t want to pressure you—”

“Neil, I *want* to,” Todd cut in.

“Oh,” Neil muttered. “Just… just checking.” He let his grip loosen slightly, let his shoulders sag a little as his chest fluttered. “I’m— I’m glad. That you want to. Because…” Neil felt the anxiety that had formed in his stomach begin to slough away as the revelation dawned over him. “Because I wanted you to come, too.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” And with that, Neil fell silent—not daring to open his mouth again until they were rolling through the lapse in the Welton fence beside the lake, at which point he began to point out all of the different landmarks of the school to Todd. There were many to name, especially since they’d taken the scenic (and, more importantly, less exposed) route along the lake shore. Neil could just barely make out the silhouettes of the Welton towers cresting the slope, but it was enough for him to guide Todd’s gaze to where the library, dorms, and main hall all were.

“And this,” he explained, nodding his head to their right, “is the dock.”

“Hmm,” Todd purred in his ear, the sound warm and content. (Neil hoped the shiver that ran up his spine wasn’t detectable through his shoulders, hoped that Todd didn’t notice the wobble of the bike as Neil had to fight his body.) “What do you guys use the d-dock for?”

“Rowing. Swimming, if it’s hot enough.” Neil thought back on the joke he’d made earlier. “Dumping bodies, occasionally.”

Todd chuckled. (*That* shiver was definitely detectable through the shoulders, Neil realised with a flare of panic.) “It’s interesting to see all these p-places, again…”

“Again?” Neil mused.

“Yes, well… I *have* b-been here before, Neil,” Todd answered.

Neil’s face burnt, as he realised how utterly stupid he was being. “Oh. Oh, of course. Because of your—” Neil cut himself off, unsure if he should finish that sentence.

“Not even that,” Todd responded. If he’d noticed Neil’s hesitation, he didn’t mention it—not verbally, anyway. But from the way his grip on Neil’s shoulders slackened, it seemed he was appreciative of it. “I actually… c-came here for a tour. Wh-When I was moving from Balincrest.”

“Really?” Neil blurted, a little too quickly. “Wait— Why didn’t you?

“Why didn’t I…?”

Neil let out a single, ragged breath, having to pedal harder now that they were approaching the hillside up to the woods. “Why didn’t you come to Welton?”

Todd went still and silent behind him.

“Sorry,” Neil quickly covered. “You don’t have to answer that—”

“My parents,” Todd said, voice alarmingly even. “They thought it wouldn’t be the best for me. I didn’t r-really…” Todd’s voice trailed off.

"…get a choice in the matter," Neil finished.

A small, mirthless chuckle, and then, "Yeah."

They both fell silent again, this time until Neil pulled up beside the entrance to the forest—the ending point for this little ride through the best of Welton's sights. "This is our stop," Neil supplied. "Unless you feel like riding over roots for the next hour."

"Maybe another time," Todd remarked, a glimmer of cheer back in his voice. Then he hopped off of the seat, with Neil following suit not long after—laying the bike on its side in the grass and gathering his bag from the basket, slinging the strap over his shoulder. From his bag he pulled the spare flashlight out, switched it on, watched its flickering beam catch in the wheel-spokes of the bike before he shone it into the forest's entrance. It created brilliant, terrifying shadows across the branches it lit, shadow puppets with long, clawing limbs. Neil gulped. *Had it always done that*?

He pulled his face into a weak smile as he turned to Todd. "Coming?"

Todd was fretting something awful with his hands, but he nodded anyway. "You lead."

Neil nodded back, spun around, and marched into the forest—his heart began to speed up, catching glances of umbral spectres flitting through the gaps between the trees. He halted a few steps in, realising just how *dark* it became once under the roof of the forest; how many noises seemed to echo around the deadened trunks; how starkly different the atmosphere was without the company of five other rowdy, teenage boys. The flashlight dimmed unexpectedly, and for a split second nothing could be seen—as behind Neil, there came a

crack of twigs and a tap on his shoulder.

Neil spun like a top, almost concussing Todd with the flashlight he held, pointed out, like a sword—he narrowly missed, instead only blinding the boy once it flickered back to life.

“Oh,” he stammered, lowering the flashlight swiftly. “S-Sorry, Todd, I — What did you want?”

Todd’s hand was still caught in the air, fingers held outwards at Neil’s shoulder level. He lowered it along with his eyes, scouring the forest floor that neither boy could see.

“I-I saw you… You were j-just—” Todd gulped. “You were—”

“I was *what*, Todd?” Neil asked, forcing a grin back onto his face.

Todd’s brow furrowed. “Nothing.” Then his expression became schooled, calm. “I just almost l-lost you, was all. That flashlight can’t be t-trusted.” Neil caught an uptick of the corners of the boy’s mouth as he continued, “We should probably make sure we d-don’t… get separated, right?”

Neil studied the boy. “What do you suggest?”

Todd chewed on his lip, before finally extending out his hand. “J-Just so we don’t get lost,” he explained.

Neil looked down at the offered hand, ghost-white in the flashlight’s

glow, the shadows cast by the fingers falling like pillars across the palm. He raised his eyes to Todd's face—seeing it smiling, fringed by the soft fabric of the borrowed duffle coat. Neil reached out his own hand, took Todd's in his. An anchoring, sobering cold threaded through the gaps between his knuckles, and he couldn't help but breathe slowly out.

"G-Good to get going, now?" Todd asked.

Neil met the boy's powder blue eyes. He grinned. "All good," he answered.

And with that, Neil pulled Todd along the forest trail, following the susurrus of the stream hidden somewhere amidst the shadows—skipping confidently over the litter-strewn path, the cool, comforting weight of Todd's hand clasping his.

They were at the cave before Neil knew it. And only there, both of them giggling as they approached the entrance, did Neil realise—his heartbeat had slowed back to normal, the tight knot that had been forming in his lungs now all but disentangled. He looked over at Todd, blonde hair sticking to the inside of his hood, and felt more at ease than he had in a long while.

"Ready?" he asked Todd, standing before the mouth of the cave. From inside muffled laughter could be heard, echoing around the stone, and gold light spilled out into the night—dancing with the roaring flame inside. Smoke billowed out of the hole at the mound's top, fading into the clearing sky above, a few stars winking through the waning cloud cover.

"R-Ready," Todd confirmed.

Neil smiled, ear-to-ear, and led them both inside.

Chapter End Notes

hey! thanks so much for reading!

A quick (but important) life update for all of you, I've got uni starting next week! And I'm also sick! So, yeah, I'm gonna have to rearrange my whole schedule for when I write and stuff. I'm still gonna try and update every week, and still only on weekends, but updates MIGHT have to become a more fortnightly thing, idk (so dont be shocked if I miss a week here and there). sorry about that in advance :(

I DO plan on finishing this fic (eventually) and am very grateful for all of the reads and kudos and comments, seriously, all of you are so incredible <3 thank you all again and sorry again also <3

I Remember When I See The Moon

Chapter Summary

> The Dead Poets Society have yet another meeting. This time, though, there's a special guest in attendance.

Chapter Notes

> Chapter title from "Add Up My Love"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The silence when Neil first entered the cave, Todd trailing in after him, was *deafening*. The poets, all having been previously engaged in their own respective flavours of horseplay, suddenly froze—still and soundless—into the oddest tableau of statues Neil had ever witnessed.

“Hey guys!” Neil chirped through his gritted teeth, gesturing behind him. “This is Todd!” He pulled the boy further into the cave, a movement made difficult by Todd turning just as statuesque as the other poets. (*Terrific,* Neil thought. *He’s fitting in already.*)

Cameron was sitting by the fire with Knox, having been chatting adamantly away while he stoked the blaze with a rolled-up magazine. Charlie and Pitts were both standing, having been involved in a formidable game of keep-away with Meeks (also standing) in the middle. Now they were all stopped, staring up at Neil and Todd. The only noises were the crackle of the fire, the echo of residual merrymaking, Cameron’s yelp as the flames crept far enough up the magazine’s paper to nip at his fingers. The small, leatherbound book that Meeks had been uselessly grabbing for—his pocket-sized copy of *The Aeneid*, it seemed—had just been newly launched by Charlie, hitting the stunned Pitts directly in the face before it comically flopped onto the dirt floor.

Meeks was the first to break out of the stupor, taking advantage of the other’s boys’ shock to swoop in and snatch his book back up off of the dust. This helpfully left him as the closest member to the newly-

entered pair—he brushed at the ends of his coat before standing back up, meeting Neil and Todd's collective gaze, offering out a small, genial wave.

"Hi, my name's Steven Meeks," he said, walking forwards until he was a polite distance separated from Todd. Neil had sternly warned the poets in advance not to try pressuring the boy into any handshakes, remembering his own past experience—he had spent a not insignificant amount of time yesterday schooling each and every one of the members on this point. A point which, however, turned out to be quite moot; Todd, nodding stiffly, ended up stepping forward and offering out his own hand anyway. Meeks' gaze flitted down to it, face furrowing slightly in confusion, before smiling curiously and taking it in his own.

Sometime during Meek's introduction, Knox had managed to form an orderly queue behind him. Once Meeks was done, Knox sauntered ahead, taking his place in front of Todd. "Hey. Knox Overstreet," he declared, grinning knowingly. The two shook hands, and then Knox had turned on his heel to call over the rest of the society.

The awkward moment unfrozen, Neil watched warily from over Todd's shoulder as both Pitts and Cameron sat up out of their seats and approached—the former ruffling Meeks' hair as he passed, while the latter was preoccupied nursing the burns on his fingers. Pitts introduced himself in a fashion exceeding the first two boys' in conciseness, with a simple, "Pitts," before he enthusiastically clasped Todd's hand. "Nice to finally talk to someone who's not just another top of a head," he laughed. "Bunch of *dwarves* around here, I tell you." Which Neil—

Neil *knew* that Todd was tall. Todd did his very best to hide the fact, hunched over as he always was, but Neil was still able to tell. He'd just never considered it in comparison to others. Now that Pitts had pointed it out—even gone as far as to place a flattened hand at Todd's head level and, keeping it at a steady height, bring it to where it met his own brow—Neil couldn't help but make a mental note of the inch or so of height Todd probably had on him.

After Pitts had shuffled out of the way, Cameron took his spot and shared a notably *clinical* handshake with Todd; prim and proper, like he was greeting a new coworker. “The name’s Richard Cameron,” he said, before dropping Todd’s hand and coughing awkwardly into his own fist. He then fumbled out a piece of paper from his pocket, which he began to read aloud from; reciting a spiel that he’d obviously rehearsed earlier. Wouldn’t be the first time he’d pulled this specific stunt—Neil could feel Charlie rolling his eyes from across the cave.

Neil watched the emotions on Todd’s face develop as Cameron read out his speech, which seemed to be an official ‘*Welcome to the Society*’ declaration. Todd seemed confused, primarily, which was understandable—he hadn’t been around Cameron for the vast majority of his academic career, hadn’t been subject to this song and dance more times than he could count. Neil was a second away from cutting Cameron short when the boy finished, with a… surprisingly *sweet* invitation for Todd to ask him any questions should he need to. At some point, Todd’s confusion had bled into a sort of surprised affection—following Cameron’s offer with a slightly awed, “Th-Thank you,” after which Neil decided that it was time for him to pull them both away to their seat.

It wasn’t that Cameron’s little spiel *lacked* charm—it had a bit *too* much, in Neil’s opinion, considering it’d had Todd sputtering out his dazed gratitude at the end like it did. But for all its charm, Neil didn’t think it was *that* nice. Cameron had barely changed his tone reading it, hadn’t looked up from the page enough, had overemphasised the whole “No telling of this to any teachers, parents, or other authority figures,” part a bit *too* hard. *Not anything to gasp at*, Neil thought bitterly, as he sat down. *Not like Todd did, anyway*. For God’s sake, the boy was almost *blushing*—

Neil directed Todd to sit on the opposite side of him, so that the other boy could be closest to the fire. (It was definitely *not* because it placed Neil between him and Cameron, blocking the redheaded boy entirely from Todd’s view. Neil was just looking out for the boy’s warmth, was all.)

Last to introduce himself, incredibly, was Charlie. He'd also found his own seat, lounging along one of the cave walls as if it was his own personal chaise. It didn't look particularly comfortable, with only a shed duffle coat between him and the hard, stone floor, but it clearly must've been—because he didn't bother to stand as he spoke, only grinning up at Todd from his recline, canines flashing in the firelight.

"Charlie Dalton," he drawled, eying Todd as if sizing him up. Neil thought it looked too much like a lion leering at its prey, and shot Charlie an admonishing stare—one that the other boy refused to meet, still needling his gaze into Todd. Neil could feel Todd begin to squirm beside him, and so stood smartly to his feet.

"Well!" he announced, clapping his hands together. "Now that we're all *properly acquainted*—" He threw Charlie one, last, vaguely threatening look before proceeding. "Shall we finally get this meeting underway?"

Neil felt Todd, quietly settled at his side, suddenly spook at the abrupt, raucous applause of the other poets. He decided to ignore, for now, the flutter in his chest from Todd choosing to flinch *into* him rather than *away*—electing instead to pick out the battered copy of *Five Centuries of Verse* from his bag, handling it like the precious artifact it was. Even though Neil had the long-ago pencilled-in lines memorised at this point, he still flipped the book open to the proper page and placed a finger upon the point he was to read from. Then he cleared his throat.

"Before we commence this meeting," Neil began, "we must first welcome a new, honorary poet tonight. Our guest of honour—and newly seventeen-year-old scholar—Todd Anderson!"

This time, when the poets broke out into clapping, Todd didn't jump—but the flush that had faded from his face made its grand return. He

laughed, too, the mask of shyness slowly (but *surely*) slipping away.

"As our guest of honour," Neil continued, smiling, "he is entirely exempt from having to read, if he so wishes. Furthermore, he gets as many of the snacks as he wants—" Neil motioned down towards the 'picnic blanket' that had already been arranged in the centre of the circle. Charlie opened his mouth to protest, but Neil barrelled on before he had the chance. "And *so*, without further ado, I hereby invoke society member Henry David Thoreau…"

To Neil, the familiar words rolling off of his tongue felt as if they held an extra edge this meeting—as if the air had a pulse to it, as if it was charged. The lines he read aloud sounded especially sharp resounding about the cave, like the firing of a pistol that commenced a race. As he finished, he glanced down at Todd, who was grinning carefully and applauding tentatively along with the rest. Neil's heart skipped a beat. He snapped the poetry collection shut, setting himself back down on his seat.

And just like that, the meeting was underway—a meeting which Neil couldn't help but feel both terribly nervous and helplessly excited for; one that he wasn't entirely sure how it would play out.

Well.

He'd just have to sit back and see, wouldn't he?

It was at least a dozen poems and one pipe-bowl's worth of tobacco later, and Neil was having a difficult time comprehending the scene in front of him. Not that he was confused by what was happening—Charlie arguing with Cameron over some arbitrary hypothetical was a *terribly* bog-standard affair at this point. No, Neil was far more puzzled

by the fact that they'd arrived at this point as they had.

It was strange.

It was very, very strange.

Because Neil knew it had to be clumsy before it became easy. That every joke would come out a little stunted at first, that every member would begin too wary to contribute much more than half-measures. Neil knew that every conversation, until at least a good couple hours in, would hang in the air a little limply—before coming to its agonising, inevitable death. And it was only *after* the awkwardness had been cleared out—funnelled through the hole in the cave roof, like the smoke billowing off of the fire—that everything would begin to *truly* work out.

Neil just hadn't expected it to happen so *fast*.

Not that it had happened all at once, of course; it had still been more of a gradual, fragmentary process. One boy would read a poem from the collection, have all of the other poets politely comment on it, and then Neil would subtly nudge Todd for his viewpoint—which Todd would politely refuse to give. *At first*. After a few poem readings, however, Todd's face was beginning to contort with withholding his thoughts, and eventually it became too much for him. He started to sprinkle in breadcrumbs of his opinion, strings of observations which grew lengthier and lengthier as Todd got more and more into his element.

It had taken a remarkably shorter amount of time than Neil had predicted before Todd began to offer up his own thoughts unprompted; identifying notable intricacies in the metre, structure, or rhyming scheme that none of the other poets had picked up on—and yet seemed starkly obvious once their presence had been pointed out.

It became almost a game; the poets would read out poems they'd already discussed in meetings prior, and Todd would manage to discern some small detail they hadn't picked up on before. *Every time*.

And so, before Neil knew it, the stiffness that had existed in the cave before had thawed—the snowmelt slipperying the gears of conversation, allowing them to spin as naturally as they always had. Which had brought them to this point; Todd laughing along as easily as any of the other boys at Charlie and Cameron's incessant bickering, pipe cupped between his fingers, posture relaxed as he rested against the side of the cave.

And it was so *strange*.

Not because Todd didn't fit in—

But because he fit in *too well*.

It was like Neil had just woken from a dream. Like he'd just crossed the threshold from reverie into reality, and was being struck over the head by the clarity that comes with renewed consciousness. It was disorientating, sometimes, when Neil woke up and had to blink away the fantasy that had gathered behind his eyelids—thrown by the sudden, sharp contrast of what was so *unmistakeably* real and so *unmistakeably* fake. It was a distinction that he couldn't make while trapped within the dreams themselves; it was only once he'd escaped them that he realised that *no*, he *didn't* have any assignments due that day—and even if he had, none of them would've involved having to babysit Knox's younger sister. Who *didn't exist*.

Because what had the society been, really, when it had only had six members instead of seven? It seemed impossible to Neil, now, that that was what it had been all this time. It was like a blindfold had been pulled from his eyes, showing that there had always been a spare

seat open in the cave, an empty slot waiting to be filled. And once he noticed it, Neil couldn't—*wouldn't*—pull that blindfold back down, wouldn't think himself capable of going back.

Neil decided, watching pipe-smoke curl over Todd's lips as he laughed at Cameron's indignant tone, that he *had* to find a way to sneak the boy into more meetings. If he couldn't, it would forever feel as if there was a piece missing from the group, the society a jigsaw puzzle forming an incomplete picture. The cave would seem sadder for the boy's absence, haunted by the ghost of who should've been there—the conversation echoing around its walls one voice too thin, the group held within its sanctuary one member too small.

"I'm just *saying*, Richard," Charlie sighed, "is that I definitely *could* do it if I wanted to. I'm not saying it's actually going to happen."

"And I'm just *saying*, Dalton," Cameron spat back, "is that that's *bull*. There's no way they'd let you in."

"Oh, you're just *jealous*," Charlie crooned, waving away the other boy's words. "Jealous that *I* could worm my way into a gentleman's club if I wanted, and you couldn't."

"*Okay*, first of all, I *still* think that's a stupid name for it—hardly any *gentlemen* there," Cameron complained. "And secondly— I'm not *jealous*. Why would I even want to do that, anyway?"

Charlie poked his tongue into the inside of his cheek, bumping out the flesh as he smirked. "Gee, I don't know, Richard, why *would* someone want to enter a club with a bunch of half-naked women in it?"

The other poets snickered as Cameron's face turned as red as his hair. "You— You know they'd just check your age before you went in,

right?" he argued. "They'd see that you're a high school student, then they'd kick you out onto the curb."

"Not with this handsome mug." Charlie placed his hand out flat, palm-down, under his chin, resting his face upon it as he batted his eyelashes. "I'd *wile* my way in."

Cameron balked as Pitts cut in. "Hah! He's got you there, Cameron."

"Point, Dalton," Meeks scored.

It always went like this; every meeting, two poets would inevitably find some menial point of contention to squabble over. It could be Charlie and Cameron (like it was now), or it could be Charlie and Knox, or even Charlie and Neil, or Charlie and—

Every meeting it was Charlie and one other poet getting into some lengthy row, made lengthier by the fact that Charlie was *one stubborn bastard* who couldn't be persuaded he was wrong about any subject. (Neil had seen the boy's grades before—if those couldn't convince Charlie he wasn't the genius he presumed himself to be, then *nothing* could.) Charlie's selected debate partner of the week always tried their damnedest, though, and were very rarely rewarded for their efforts with Charlie folding his arms across his chest and declaring that he was "bored now," and that they should all "talk about something else." Which everyone understood to be the telltale sign that, somehow, the other poet had *won*.

And while this battle of attrition was fought, all the other poets would happily settle down on the sidelines to watch it unfold. Occasionally they'd interject with their own comments, tallying and heckling and betting on the outcome—Neil had once won a whole packet of cigarettes when Meeks, of all people, was able to absolutely school Charlie into the ground on the best way to dispose of a corpse. (A

packet which, the very next day, Neil had given Meeks half of.)

But the thing was, Neil didn't usually participate in that sort of stuff. He was happy to wager, but ordinarily that was it; after the bets were placed, he was satisfied to simply sit back on the proverbial bleachers and spectate—laughing, sure, but not throwing in his own little comments like the rest of the poets did. It was those 'little comments' that always added fuel to the argument, causing it to burn on whenever it threated to fade. Enough comments and the argument could last the entire night, until faces were red and voices were hoarse and the rest of the poets were weeping with laughter.

And, well—

Neil didn't *usually* participate in that stuff.

"Yeah!" he added, pointing at Charlie's still fluttering eyes. "Who *wouldn't* let such a handsome face into their gentleman's club?"

Cameron spun, glaring daggers at Neil, which only made him burst out laughing again. And beside him—sitting so close his leg was practically pressed against Neil's own—was the reason behind Neil's newfound interest in participating. Todd, catching a glimpse of Cameron's veritably *seething* scowl, practically folded in half as he wheezed, voice growing weak with it. As he did, he leaned into Neil imperceptibly further, warm skin and bouncing sandy-blonde locks and crow's feet gathering about his eyes as he grinned so hard it seemed painful. Neil felt a sick shot of adrenaline punch through him as he stared at the boy, with an affection in his expression that he desperately hoped wasn't too blatant.

"Oh, *I don't know*," Cameron crowed on, incredulous. "The *man* standing outside the entrance?" He rounded back on Charlie, who stuck out his bottom lip in mock disconsolance. "Your stupid face isn't

going to get you into *anywhere* when the guy selling you tickets is a… a *guy*!"

Neil leaned over, matching the angle Todd had crumpled himself into. Todd looked up at him, powder blue eyes ringed with firelight, and Neil wanted nothing more than for that single moment—both boys locking gazes through tear-gathered lash lines—to last forever.

Charlie sat back up, tapping at his chin with his index finger. "I'd just have to dress up as a lady, then," he said, casually.

Neil's eyes were pulled away from Todd, to instead stare blankly at Charlie—just like how every other poet in the cave was currently doing.

"Wh-What?" Cameron sputtered.

"I'd charm the guy out front by dressing up as a lady," Charlie repeated, sly smile on his lips and a roll to his shoulders which served as a shrug. "I'd buy a dress, put on some makeup, stuff some paper down the front of my chest—"

Cameron turned an impossibly deeper shade of crimson, as the rest of the poets broke into another round of helpless cackling.

"Th-That's—! That's *ridiculous*!" Cameron squawked.

"It *would* work, though," Charlie replied.

“No—!” No it *wouldn’t*!” Cameron cried, pitch heightening and voice pinching. “Just— Honestly—” He flailed with his hands, before dropping them in a defeated heap in his lap. “Where would you even get the *dress* from?”

“From those guys who do clothing, *duh*.”

“Tailors,” Knox inserted.

Charlie’s smile grew tight. He clicked his fingers, not looking at Knox. “Right! *Tailors*.”

“Oh, *really*,” Cameron huffed, crossing his arms. “Because you’d go to a tailor and tell them to fit you a *dress*.”

“I’d just say it’s for my girlfriend,” Charlie defended.

“Hah! Fat chance they’d believe *that*.”

Charlie pulled himself forward as the audience of five other boys let out a chorus of low “*ooh*”’s.

“I’d watch myself if I were you, *Cameron*,” he warned. “I’m not the one arguing *against* going to see a bunch of half-naked girls.” He flashed his teeth, tauntingly. “Maybe there’s some other kind of club you’d be more *inclined* to go to, huh?”

Neil, being so close to Todd, heard the boy inhale sharply under his breath—evidently a little *too* sharply, as Todd began to hack out his

lungs shortly afterwards. Neil instinctively sidled up right close, hitting him gently between his shoulder blades as he tried to catch Todd's coughing face.

"Hey? You alright, Todd?" Neil asked. The other poets had caught onto what was happening at this point, and had all stopped.

Todd looked up, still grinning, but when he tried to speak he ended up choking on his own words—breaking back down into his coughing fit.

"Jesus, Charlie," Pitts said, shaking his head. "You killed Todd."

Charlie threw up his hands. "It's not my fault I'm funny!"

"It is," Cameron hummed. "And you're not."

Neil ignored the sounds of the other poets all speaking over each other as he studied Todd's face—his eyes were creased and reddened, this time not from laughter. His nose was scrunched, and he'd dropped his pipe at some point. Neil picked it up off of the dirt.

"Think you might want to give this a break for a bit," he whispered, placing the pipe on Neil's other side—away from Todd. Todd nodded weakly, giving a thumbs-up as Neil sniffed at the air. He grimaced when he realised it was a good ninety-percent tobacco smoke, recalling how Todd had shyly admitted earlier to never even having *touched* a cigarette before this meeting.

"I'm fine, Neil—" Todd tried, sentence interrupted immediately by another cough.

“You should get some fresh air, as well,” Neil continued, standing out of his seat. “Come on.”

Todd gave Neil an odd look, but ultimately followed suit once Neil had snatched at his wrist. He dutifully shadowed Neil as he grabbed his bag—as well as the spare flashlight from before, which he stuffed into his satchel—all onehanded, before strolling right past the fire and towards the cave’s entrance.

“We’re just getting some fresh air!” Neil called back, as he led him and Todd out into the dark forest. He was answered mostly in cursory nods and subtle waves, as everyone began to focus back in on Cameron and Charlies resuming their dispute. Only Knox, sitting close by to the entrance, really looked back—and in his case, it was only a curious glance down at where Neil was still pulling on Todd’s wrist. Then the boy wheeled his attention back around, the ends of his mouth tugging upwards.

The last thing Neil heard before he stepped out into the cold, nippy air, was Cameron grumbling miserably under his breath, “*You* were the one talking about dressing up as a *girl*—”

Neil led Todd a little ways down the path they’d taken earlier, pulling his coat in closer around him as the air became frigid around them. They walked down the shallow hill the cave was carved into, right up near the brook that ran beside the path. It was the very same one that had guided the boys to the old Indian cave that first night, when the Dead Poets Society had been officially reconvened. The stream trickled softly, now, the sound of it filling the tranquil evening. Todd crouched down beside its bank, Neil hovering behind him.

“You know, there’s a waterfall a little further along,” Neil remarked, after a short while had passed—and Todd looked a little less suffocated in the face.

“R-Really?” Todd replied. “A *waterfall*?” His voice was still rough around its fringes, but it also didn’t dissolve into a coughing fit as soon as he started speaking—so it was an improvement, and one Neil was glad for.

“Well… not a waterfall *per se*,” Neil conceded, sheepishly. “But it’s close enough—we could go see it, if you want.”

Todd looked back, head tilted up towards Neil. “In… the dark?”

Neil felt heat crawl up his face, quickly moving his eyes away from Todd’s. “Okay, maybe not now *exactly*—” he amended. “Another time. One when it’s not so… completely dark.”

Todd hummed. Then he fell back onto the leaf-littered bank, sitting cross-legged at the water’s edge. “Another t-time, then,” he echoed, watching the water babbling past. “And in your d-defence— It’s not *that* dark.”

Neil looked up to see that Todd had a point; the sky had fully cleared by now, with what was once an all-encompassing curtain of cloud having become nothing more than an ominous spectre looming over the distant horizon. Like the ocean’s tide heaving away, leaving shells and foam scattered on the wet sand—so too had the moon and stars been left behind by the pulling back of the clouds, shining down on the world below. The moon itself looked just shy of full—it was waxing, if Neil remembered correctly—as it danced, reflected, in the rushes at Todd’s feet. The gibbous’ shape became blurred in the brookwater, reduced to white paint-strokes by the torrent, the image of it breaking as ripples passed over the mirrored face.

Neil came up and sat beside Todd, sinking into the mulch on the

ground. He let his bag fall next to him, strap still pulled over his shoulder. He watched the water for a moment before speaking.

"Sorry, I should've realised… what, with the smoke and all." Neil sighed. "I guess the rest of us have all built up an immunity to it. You, though…"

"Eh. The smoke was f-fine, mostly," Todd mused. "I was just a l-little — A little s-surprised. That's all. My throat was a-already pretty dry, and something must've gone down the wrong tr-tract—"

"Surprised?" Neil repeated.

"B-By what Charlie said," Todd explained. "It… c-caught me off guard, a little, is all."

"Hm," Neil mumbled. "If I were you, I wouldn't be worried about anything Charlie says. Ever. Most of the words that come out of his mouth are…" Neil trailed off, moving his hand in circles as he searched for the word. "…*shit*."

Todd chuckled, the sound light and warming and pleasant. "It *was* funny, to be honest. J-Just a little unexpected."

Neil shrugged. "That's Charlie for you."

"That's Charlie," Todd agreed, the sides of his mouth beginning to crimp upwards.

Neil couldn't refuse the smile that sprang to his lips if he wanted to. "So." He nudged Todd's shoulder with his own, motioning back towards the cave with his head. "What did you think?"

"Of what?" Todd asked.

"You *know*," Neil said, laughing softly under his breath. "What did you think of… *everything*, tonight? *Everyone*?"

Todd paused, face bunching up as he thought. His eyes drifted back over to the water streaming past them, as he slowly breathed out. "T-Tonight was… something."

"Something?"

"Something *good*," Todd reiterated, lolling his head to the side so he could grin at Neil's worried face. "R-Really good."

"Oh." Neil swallowed. "That's… I'm glad."

"Your f-friends are… interesting, too," Todd continued. "P-Pitts and Meeks both seem f-friendly. Pitts kind of… scares me a little… but n-not in a bad way! He's j-just—"

"Hard to get a read on?" Neil suggested.

Todd's expression turned guilty for a second. "Y-Yeah… Meeks is a little easier, tr-truthfully…"

Neil nodded his agreement. “You’ll get used to Pitts, eventually,” he assured him. “Took me a year or so, but you’ll get there.”

“Oh! A-And Cameron seems nice!” Todd chimed.

Neil bristled. “*Please*,” he said. “He was hamming it up a little. He writes out a speech for *everything*.”

“O-Oh,” Todd stammered, a little disappointed.

Neil fought back the urge to slam the flat of his palm into his own forehead. “*Although*—” he quickly added, “Cameron did seem more enthusiastic about this one, specifically.” The compliment tasted like reluctance on his tongue, but he let it fall from his lips anyway. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him be that… *sweet*… before. Reckon you’re his favourite, already.” Neil bit back a gag.

Todd, however, seemed to light up a little, so the words were worth the sour tang in his mouth. Neil normally had no issue singing any of the poets’ praises, even Cameron—who he had to defend against the other boys *constantly*. But tonight, for whatever reason…? Neil was happy to go without commending him overmuch. *Especially* in front of Todd.

“What about Knox?” Neil queried, moving on swiftly.

“He was… cool,” Todd answered, mouth quirked in thought. “Is he… always that qu-quiet, though?”

“Well… *no*,” Neil admitted. “He’s usually a bit more vocal…” Neil thought back on Knox’s odd behaviour all throughout the night, the day, the *week*. “He’s been a little… off, recently,” he supplied, realising it more for himself than he was for Todd.

“He kept staring at Ch-Charlie…” Todd uttered, trailing off as his eyes darted back towards the cave.

Neil made a contemplative noise in the back of his throat. “They haven’t been on… great terms, as of late. I *think*.”

“Charlie seemed f-fine, though,” Todd pointed out. “Like he h-had everything under c-control.” Todd shivered beside Neil, who shuffled a little closer—hoping that the proximity would help. It certainly made Neil a little warmer.

“Like I said before— Charlie’s just *like that*.”

“I g-gathered as much,” Todd said. Neil didn’t want to hope, but he swore that the boy was also shuffling closer—the fabric of Neil’s coat was now grazing against that of Todd’s borrowed one, the gentle brush of cloth a whisper hidden beneath the babbling of the stream. “Charlie seems… he’s f-fun. A little loud… but he’s fun.”

“And the meeting itself?” Neil asked, voice a little breathy.

Todd chewed his lip, looking down at the forest floor his hands were resting on. “I’m… enjoying it. Maybe, l-like, a *lot*. T-Turns out I like p-poetry, who knew?” He looked up at Neil with a slanted smile. Then he laughed. “Could’ve used some b-better snacks, though— Who threw *raisins* onto the ‘picnic blanket’?”

Neil laughed in kind, hopelessly fond. “That reminds me, actually—” He pulled himself away from Todd, grabbing at his bag strap and yanking it over his shoulder so he could nurse the satchel in his lap. Then he began to rummage around in it, producing out the flashlight —which he flicked on, and then handed off to Todd. “Here, hold this for a second.”

Neil felt the flashlight be dutifully plucked from his grip, its beam slicing out over the running brook as Todd whipped it around curiously.

“And shine it in the bag, please,” Neil clarified, grinning.

“Oh! Sorry!”

The beam had its course corrected into the inside of Neil’s bag, perfectly illuminating the contents held within. With the light, Neil was able to pilfer through the other rubbish inside, pushing past papers and such until he reached the prize he’d stowed away within the inset pocket.

“Here we are!” he exclaimed, pulling out his contraband—the two muffins he’d smuggled out of dinner before, lovingly wrapped in his handkerchief. They were crumbling a little at the bottom, but were in otherwise surprisingly decent condition. Neil offered one out to Todd, warning him as he did. “Don’t tell Charlie. He’ll have my head if he learnt I was sneaking food into meetings and *wasn’t* sharing it.”

“My lips are sealed,” Todd promised, gratefully accepting the food. “Although…” He inspected the muffin, even pulling up the flashlight and shining its beam over the pastry. “We might want to get r-rid of the evidence.”

“Fantastic idea, Todd.” With that, Neil eagerly bit into said evidence—crumbs cascading down his chin as he watched Todd do the same.

“What else have you got in that bag?” Todd asked, voice muffled through his bite of muffin. He had the manners to cover his mouth as he did, at least—although his other hand still held the flashlight, so he ended up momentarily blinding Neil with his attempt at politeness.

“*Careful* with that,” Neil griped, Todd giggling as Neil dramatically blinked away the black spots burned into his retinae. “Here, look for yourself.” He scrambled to grab the strap of his bag, tossing it into Todd’s lap.

Todd finished his pastry, wiped away his hand on his pants, and then flipped open Neil’s satchel and began exploring its contents—holding the flashlight above it like a searchlight as he pilfered through. He grinned when he revealed the baby-blue handkerchief, now leaking crumbs onto Todd’s shirt; moving on, he mumbled affirmatively as his fingers found Neil’s script booklet; and finally, his brow furrowed as he produced—

“Oh,” Neil said. “I… forgot that was in there.”

Todd turned the notebook over in his hands, examining it from every angle. “This is…?”

Neil sighed. “My English notebook,” he explained. He looked back to see Todd’s fingers practically itching at the edge of the paper, nails catching on the hem of its cover. Neil swallowed. “You— You can look in it, you know.”

Todd peered up, pupils wide. Neil had told his fair share of anecdotes from his unorthodox English class, no doubt some of which had

picqued Todd's interest. "R-Really?"

Neil shrugged, even as his heart raced. "Seems only fair," he replied.

Todd ducked his head, appreciatively flipping through the pages of the notebook. He stopped on one in particular, confusion colouring his face as he frowned down at it. "Hmm. I d-don't remember you mentioning *this*." Neil glimpsed over, catching the words *TO INDEED BE A GOD!* written out, the letters sitting atop a pencil sketch of a soccer ball being booted away.

"I haven't told you guys *half* of what happens in our English class," Neil answered, sitting back, arms outstretched behind him. He let his focus drift out up to the sky, up to the near-complete circle of the waxing moon, the sound of the stream and the sound of Todd leafing through the notebook weaving together. "It's not just that, though," he added. "I also write down anything funny that happens throughout the day, anything interesting, anything noteworthy." Neil hummed. "I also write down what happens at the society meetings, sometimes. That's why I usually bring it to the cave."

"Like taking the minutes," Todd observed.

"Something like that." Neil fiddled with the wooden toggles of his coat. "Most of the pages are just filled with random rambles, really."

"And this?" Todd held up the notebook towards Neil, showing off a series of torn-edged margins—the pages once attached to them having long since been ripped out, scrunched up, and stuffed into a wastepaper basket.

"*That*…" Neil began, before gulping. Those were the pages that had held the drafts for, and eventually the completed version, of Neil's

poetry assignment—the one that he had ended up writing about Todd for. “I’ll tell you about that another time,” Neil murmured.

Todd nodded, continuing to flip through at his leisure. Neil watched over the boy’s shoulder, soaking in every one of Todd’s breaths in, breaths out, his small puffs of laughter as he read over Neil’s silly little notes. Eventually, Todd paused, reaching a page which—for whatever reason—jumped out in Neil’s mind. It seemed innocuous enough, with the only words Neil could make out being *Why was language invented?* Underneath which, was pencilled the line: *To woo women*. Todd, however, had largely skimmed past all of that, instead zoning in on some small, scribbled scrawl in the corner that Neil couldn’t even read without his glasses—

Except—

Except he didn’t need his glasses to know what it said. Because he *knew*. The realisation hit him like a freight train. He knew what words he’d written, knew them off by heart, knew he could repeat them back to himself in his sleep if he wanted—

He snatched the notebook out of Todd’s hands, blood running cold with panic. But from the paling of Todd’s face, making the red of his cheeks even worse, Neil knew that the damage had already been done.

“You… r-remembered,” Todd stuttered, staring down at his emptied hands. He began to wring them in his lap, picking at the cuticles.

“Todd, I’m—” Neil clamped the notebook shut, sitting forward urgently. “I’m so sorry— It’s… only those three lines? If.. that’s better? I promise, I don’t remember the last one—”

Todd cast his gaze back down towards the patch of leaf-strewn dirt

beside him, moving his hands so that he could scratch patterns into the dust with his fingers. He flicked off the flashlight, standing it bulb-down in front of him, muttering something towards the floor—the words wispy and inaudible.

Neil stopped.

“Todd?” he begged.

“*T-Tomorrow rides he wars-ward,*” Todd recited again, voice with a bit more body to it, eyes still glued to the leaves crumbling under his hand. “*T-To a prize he cannot w-win.*”

Neil’s words died in his mouth as his heart skipped a beat, every other noise in the world falling away from his senses—all except that of Todd’s speech; quiet, constrained, and yet thunderous in Neil’s ears.

“Wh-What?” he choked out.

“Th-That’s… That’s the last line of that st-stanza,” Todd confessed—*confessed,* as if it were a crime he’d committed.

Neil could only stare, eyes tracing over Todd’s face. The boy was silhouetted in the moonlight, silver glowing over his features, pearlescence trailing over his lips as he continued.

“I— I know. It’s k-kind of—”

“Brilliant,” Neil breathed.

Todd winced, soreness splitting his expression. “It’s *n-nonsense*,” he said.

“Oh, please— You can’t seriously believe that, can you?” Neil scoffed, his disbelief clouding over in the cold air.

Todd’s finger shunted in the earth, fingernail catching on a rock hidden beneath the mulch. He mumbled his answer under his breath, where Neil couldn’t quite make it out. It sounded like “*M-Maybe*.”

“God,” Neil exclaimed. Something coiled within his stomach. “You— You really believe that, don’t you?” He placed his notebook to the side, freeing his hand so that he could place it atop Todd’s shoulder. The other boy still refused to meet Neil’s eyes, refused to look anywhere but down at the dried muck of the brook’s bank. “You— You really think you’re…”

“W-Worthless?” Todd finished, laughing ruefully. “N-No, Neil. I know *exactly* what my w-worth is.”

Neil’s grip tightened worriedly on the boy’s shoulder. “And… that is…?” he asked, carefully.

Todd picked his finger out of the ground, flicking off the dirt that had gotten stuck under his nail. “Five d-dollars,” he spat out, shaking. “And ninety-eight cents, to be p-precise.” Todd shook his head. “Th-That’s what my f-father would say, at l-least. S-Said.. Said that that w-was how much all the chemicals in the human b-body would sell for, i-if you c-counted them up…”

Neil’s fist balled up beside him, knuckles turning white, as his other

hand squeezed Todd's shoulder. "Jesus, Todd—"

"And th-that was *b-before* I got myself k-kicked out of B-Balincrest…" Todd said, bunching up his knees, shoes scuffing against the dirt as he did. "So who kn-knows what that n-number's at n-now…"

Neil let his arm slip down Todd's shoulder, moving until it rested between the boy's shoulder blades. He moved his hand in circles, trying his best to recreate the calming gesture that he'd seen Ginny do so often. Todd sniffled, but didn't move away—even leant into Neil's hand a little, eyelids closing.

"He's wrong, Todd," Neil insisted, forcing the words out through his clenched jaw. "You *have* to know that he's wrong."

Todd laughed again—the high, beaten noise that made Neil's heart break in two. "I-I kn-know," he stammered. His voice fell quiet, barely a whisper. "B-But sometimes… I j-just— It just f-feels like m-maybe he was *right*."

Neil dipped his head closer, trying to keep the growl out of his voice. "Do you trust me, Todd?"

Todd looked up at Neil, his lips moving silently for a moment—before he pressed them shut. He nodded, firmly.

"Then trust me when I say that you're *not* worthless," Neil whispered. "And don't give me that five-ninety-eight *bullshit*. You're worth so much more than *anyone* thinks—your parents, your brother, *you*—and that's not something you can measure in money." Neil pulled back his arm, returning it to Todd's shoulder, giving the boy a gentle shake. "I don't care what anyone's told you— You, Todd Anderson, have worth. More than most people, I'd say."

Neil watched the apple of Todd's throat bob up and down as the boy swallowed, watched as Todd fought the smile slipping into the corners of his mouth. Todd laughed, brokenly—but *he laughed*, digging out the droplets that had gathered in his eyes with the heel of his palm.

"Th-Thanks," Todd said. He gestured back towards where Neil had earlier discarded his English notebook, face faltering. "P-Poem's still b-bunk, though."

Neil clicked his tongue. "Wrong," he said, smiling. "Thank you for playing, though, Mr. Anderson," he added, as he reached over to fetch the notebook—and with the same movement, grabbed for his bag, out of which he procured a pencil. He flipped open the book to a blank page, writing out those three, all-too-familiar lines again, taking great pleasure as he began to fill in the fourth row. Then he read it all aloud:

"*To he who saddles atop a storm which clouds yet never breaks,*

Atop a wind which spills the scree, and yet no whisper makes,

The Earth stark 'pon his shoulders, making mirthless of a grin—

Tomorrow rides he wars-ward, to a prize he cannot win."

Todd groaned. "Th-The lines barely mean anything, Neil," he tried. "It's n-nonsense."

"You really think I'd believe that, Todd?" Neil said, propping up his forearm Todd's shoulder, perching his chin on his hand—giving him a vantage point from which he could beam down at Todd. "I heard you in that cave— You know a *lot* about poetry. And you're telling me you *didn't* give these words any meanings?"

Todd sputtered. “Well…” he trailed off, face flushing. He turned away, staring out over the water. “I-It’s… It’s stupid.”

“I don’t reckon.”

“It *is*…” Todd mumbled.

“Come on, now, Todd,” Neil whispered. “We’re starting to sound like Cameron and Charlie.”

“We *aren’t* arguing,” Todd argued, mostly under his breath. “I wrote it. *I’m* s-saying it’s stupid.”

“And I read it,” Neil retorted, face falling a little closer to Todd’s as his voice softened. “And I’m saying it’s brilliant.”

“You don’t know wh-what it means!”

Neil wet his lips. “I don’t need to.”

Todd started, eyes flitting up. “H-How?” he asked, voice so thin it barely reached Neil’s ears.

Neil moved closer—close enough to see the moon mirrored in Todd’s irises, so much clearer than its sister reflection on the brook. “How?” he echoed, the word feathering off of his tongue.

Todd didn’t move back— Todd *didn’t move back*. His voice quivered as

he spoke, but he *didn't move back*. "H-How can you know it's b-brilliant…" Todd muttered, "…if y-you don't know wh-what it m-means?"

Neil laughed, gently, nothing more than a soft exhale out of his nose. He felt himself drawn impossibly nearer to Todd, nearer than they'd been all night, misted breaths tangling together in what little space was left between their faces.

"Isn't it obvious?" Neil breathed, listing his head ever-so-slightly to the side. His eyes dipped to Todd's lips, which the boy was teasing between his teeth. Neil looked back up. "It's cause you wrote it, Todd."

Neil could count each and every one of Todd's individual eyelashes if he wanted. He could tap the tips of their noses together, muss up Todd's fringe with his own. Instead, he waited—waited for Todd to pull away, for them both to break into laughter over Neil's stupid joke. But the moment never came. Todd's breath was warm on Neil's face, and the moment never came. Neil's heart was in his throat, and the moment never came, and—

Neil began to move on instinct, pushing slowly forward and closing the gap—

"Hey! Neil!"

The two boys fell apart, matching magnet poles pushed together. Neil felt horribly dizzy, his pulse still roaring in his ears, the ghost of Todd's breath tracing over his lips—the *lips* he was just about to press onto—

Neil scrambled to his feet, the world spinning wildly around him,

searching frantically for the source of the yelling. It turned out to be Knox, emerging out onto the bank, steps heavy as he marched. His hands were cupped in a cone around his mouth, pausing mid-shout as he caught sight of the two boys.

"Oh, thank God, *there* you two are—"

"What's this about, Overstreet?" Neil snapped, crossing his arms. (Which were trembling. God, why were they *trembling*?)

Knox flinched backwards, glancing between Neil and Todd. Then he scoffed, kicking at the ground and looking off to the side. "If you *have to know*— Charlie's done something," he explained, darkly. "Something *astronomically* stupid. I'll let *him* tell you the details, though."

Neil's anger died in his chest as he caught the anxious cadence in Knox's tone. He wheeled back around to Todd, who was now also standing—though the boy was facing the stream, watching the broken moon in the water, looking anywhere but at Neil. Neil spun back around.

"We'd best get back inside, then," he uttered. "Come on, Todd."

Then he stalked back inside the cave, steps feeling both too fast and too slow. He was dreading hearing what evil, imbecilic idea Charlie had cooked up now, wanting to delay the moment as best he could—though at the same time, Neil found that he couldn't flee the scene at the brook quick enough. He needed some smoke in his lungs, some stifling cave air that choked out all of his other thoughts. He needed a burning fire he was sat too close to, to explain away why his face was as red as it was. He trekked up the hill, Knox following closely.

And trailing behind, a little too far away from the other pair, hood now pulled over his face—came Todd.

Chapter End Notes

ok we're back (for this week, at least). thank you so much for all your lovely comments on the last chapter, yall are too nice :)

also im sorry but I cannot be convinced knox having a sister is canon. that line in the deleted scene was NOT about that, i don't care what the wiki says

thanks for reading as always <3

When You Opened The Door, Cracked Me Wide Open

Chapter Summary

> Neil is over at the Danburry's for another practice session with a group of three friends—only one third of which he can look in the eye.

Chapter Notes

> a 'quick' chapter because this part was longer than I realised and also yay something this week :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“An article?”

“Yes— Charlie published an *article*.”

Adam’s brow knitted together with confusion. “That doesn’t… *seem* all that bad.”

Neil sighed, falling backwards on the couch. “It’s not that he published an article that’s the problem,” he explained. He raised one of his hands, rubbing it on the back of his neck. “It’s the fact that it was about *letting girls into Welton*.”

“*Hm*.” Adam pursed his lips, drumming his fingers on his thigh. “I guess that *is* asking for trouble, what with Welton’s higher ups and all — What’s gonna happen to him, then?”

Neil’s hand stiffened. “That’s the thing,” he ground out. “Charlie didn’t publish it under his own name.”

Adam paused his drumming. “Wait, so he did it anonymously then?” he asked, tipping his head to the side. “What’s the problem then…?”

“Not anonymously!” Neil cut in, halfway through trying to stretch away the crick in his neck. He rearranged his legs as he did, tucking them under the coffee table between the couches—they were numb with prolonged disuse, pins-and-needles prickling across the flesh.

“Oh.” Adam flipped through the pages of the script in his hands. “So what name *did* he put the article under?”

Neil’s jaw clicked at the memory. “We have… a *name* for our study group at school,” he lied. “Kind of like… an inside joke. It’s a closely kept secret, though, just between all of us.”

“Right,” Adam replied, lounging back into the cushioning, head tipping back. “And Charlie used *that* name? The one you don’t want people outside of your study group to know?”

Neil nodded. “Precisely.”

“And I’m guessing that I’m not allowed to know what it is?” Adam was staring upwards, fanning himself with the wrinkled pages he held. It was near winter outside, and yet sitting so close to the fireplace—a steaming mug of tea close at hand, blankets and pillows piled up around them—had left the two boys toasty warm.

Neil took the opportunity to flit his eyes over towards the other two occupants of the Danburry’s’ living room, sat cozily atop an all-too familiar rug. They both had their legs crossed, speaking to each other in hushed, secret voices. Neil quickly averted his gaze.

“Yep,” he said, clearing his throat. “Members only. Very exclusive. Couldn’t let just anyone in.”

“Damn, okay,” Adam muttered towards the ceiling, before levering his head back down. “Way to make a guy feel welcome.”

“I don’t think *welcome* is exactly the goal, Adam,” Neil supplied, grinning—*despite* the cramp in his joints, the dullness in his legs, the swirling unrest in his stomach. “Perhaps the opposite, even.”

“Whatever,” Adam answered, waving the matter away with his hands. “Where were we up to? Charlie published an article saying girls should be allowed to attend Welton for… *some* reason?”

“Actually—” Neil plucked his own script from where it had fallen on the couch beside him. “We were up to *Act 2, Scene 1*. Until our practice got slightly… derailed.”

“But we’ve already been going for *ages*,” Adam complained.

“Yes, but we skipped over this part,” Neil replied, scanning over the words. “We stopped at *line one-hundred-and-forty*, to be precise— *But she, being mortal, of that boy did die. And for her sake do I rear up her boy, and for her sake I will not part with him.*”

Adam groaned, yet leafed through to the proper page all the same—then he closed the booklet shut, bookmarking the spot with an index finger. “*How long within this wood intend you stay?*” he recited. “Come on, Neil, I want to know why Charlie submitted the article!”

"*Perchance till Theseus' wedding day…*" Neil continued to drone, ignoring the other boy's pleas. "*If you will patiently dance in our round, and see our moonlight revels, go with us*—I think it's pretty obvious *why* he submitted the article, Adam—*If not, shun me, and spare me your haunts.*"

"It isn't. *Grant me that boy and I will go with thee*."

"It's give, not grant," Neil corrected. "And what do you mean *it's not obvious*? Charlie wants girls in Welton—the answer's right there."

Adam was busy narrowing his eyes so as to scrutinise his script booklet closer, double checking the line—making a face upon seeing Neil was *correct*. "Grant is better, though," he uttered, pouting. "And be *realistic*, Neil. The whole 'getting girls into Welton' isn't actually going to ever happen, right?"

"I mean… *yes*, you *are* correct," he conceded. "About both things. But in either case, it doesn't change much." Neil made a great show of coughing before locking back onto his script. "*Not for thy fairy kingdom. Fairies, away. We shall chide downright if I longer stay.*"

Adam puffed out a breath, seeming doubtful. "*Well, go thy way. Thou shalt not from this grove till I torment thee for this injury—*"

"Stop," Neil interrupted, shaking his head. "You need to put more into that delivery."

"Like what?"

"*Something*." Neil gesticulated with his hands. "It's just that you

sound… almost bored. Uninterested. You're supposed to be cursing the queen of fairies, here, remember."

"Yes, well." Adam sighed. "Some lines… I just don't know what to do with them, honestly," he admitted.

Neil's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Adam frowned, closed his script, slapped its cover with the back of his other hand. "I mean— Take this line, for example. Ol' one-and-two think it should be read with anger, almost *shouting* it. But that doesn't feel right." He threw the script onto the folded blanket besides him with a flick of his wrist. "Because in the script it doesn't *seem* so intense. It's like— It's like I want something for the line, but I can't pinpoint what it is."

"So…?" Neil asked, reaching towards the almost-empty mug of tea sat on the table between them. He hooked his fingers around the handle, raising the drink to his lips. "Just go for it, I say. And see if it sticks."

Adam folded one of his legs over the other. "I just… I find it harder to do a thing if I don't know what I'm doing with it," he explained. "Main reason why I quit the football team. Didn't know what I *wanted* from it anymore."

"But you can't always know what you want beforehand, surely," Neil pointed out between sips. "You need to experiment a little."

Adam threw his head back, groaning once more. "It's *difficult*."

"Everyone has different issues, I guess," Neil supposed. He let his gaze

wander back over to the corner of the living room, to the two figures grinning amongst themselves—off in their world, and all the happier for it. “I think I have the opposite problem, actually,” Neil confessed, the words slipping out before he realised he was speaking them. “Sometimes I… do things… and don’t know what I wanted out of them at all.”

Adam made a small, affirmative “*hm*,” in the back of his throat. “Guess you’re like your friend then, in a way.”

Neil spun back around. “What? Charlie?”

“Yeah, that one,” Adam remarked. “Doesn’t know what he wants, like you.”

Neil replaced his mug on the table, slotting it atop the ring of liquid that had been left behind on the saucer. “Charlie knows what he wants. It’s—”

“—*to get girls into Welton*,” Adam finished, snapping his attention back to Neil. “But you said that’s never going to happen. And I’m guessing Charlie knows that, too?” He quirked an eyebrow, expectantly.

Neil shrank back a little. “Well, he *does*, but—”

“So,” Adam interjected, leaning forward, lacing his fingers together out in front of him. “What *is* going to happen when the article is published?”

Neil considered it—the inevitable thread of events, winding its way out of Charlie’s decision. “Well, it’s going into print on Monday,” he

began. “It’ll probably get everybody talking, students and staff alike. And eventually, the heads of the school will read it, and get *royally* pissed, which… isn’t great.”

“And that’s what Charlie wants?”

Neil fiddled with the script he was still holding. “I wouldn’t put it past him, to be honest,” he said. “But in this case… probably not, no.”

“So he doesn’t know what he wants from it,” Adam concluded, grabbing the very last biscuit from the tray.

“*We* don’t know what he wants from it,” Neil rebutted. “Doesn’t mean *he* doesn’t have a reason behind his actions.”

“*Hm.* If I may be so bold—” Adam proposed, biting into his biscuit—cupping a hand under his mouth to catch any crumbs. “I’ve seen this kind of thing before. He might not *know* it, but maybe… maybe he just wants someone’s attention.”

“*Please*,” Neil replied. “Whose attention could Charlie possibly be going for?”

Adam hummed as he chewed, before he swallowed and wiped at his mouth. “In my experience, guys will do this sort of huge, big act in the interest of getting a *girl*.”

Neil scrunched his nose. “Do people really do that?”

“It’s more common than you’d think,” Adam replied, shrugging. “Charlie got his sights on anyone you know?”

Neil laughed. “Unless you count *Knox*,” he japed, “nobody I’m aware of.”

“Ah.” Adam sprinkled the crumbs he’d collected in his hand onto the tray. “In that case, he probably doesn’t know what he wants, then.”

Neil, helplessly, cast his gaze back to Todd. Back to Ginny. Their own plates of biscuits and mugs of tea sat on the Persian beside them, the two so distant despite their proximity. Neil’s stomach roiled. “Maybe he doesn’t,” he murmured.

Ginny had outstretched her leg, resting it on a pillow she’d pilfered from her bed—she was able to walk on it, now, but it apparently ached terribly to do so for prolonged periods of time. It clearly wasn’t aching now, however; she was laughing softly at something Todd had said, *Todd*, who was smiling so fondly back. Smiling, he was only *smiling*—and yet *that* was enough to dig some awful feeling into the pit of Neil’s chest.

Todd must’ve spotted Neil staring in his periphery, because he turned and met the other boy’s eyes for a split second. Neil tried for a smile, failed—not that it mattered. Todd had turned back around too quickly to see. Ginny had clearly caught the action, the slight tilt to Todd’s gaze. She followed with her eyes only, and didn’t linger long enough on the two boys on the couches for Neil to be sure that she had looked at all.

The paper in Neil’s hand crinkled as his hold on it rigidified.

“Did you want to take a break?”

Neil faced Adam again, the other boy's gaze dipping to the death grip Neil had on his script booklet—one he quickly loosened, uselessly ironing out the creases with the flat of his fingers.

"Sorry, did I want to…?"

"Did you want to take a break," Adam repeated. "I just thought, since we've been at this for ages now—not that it's *not* been incredibly helpful—but maybe we could do with something that *isn't*… How did you describe it, again?"

"Like trimming a hedge," Neil muttered, keeping his eyes centred forward. "Shaving at the sides until we've got perfectly shaped topiary."

Adam smiled. "That's the nice way of saying, '*you interrupting me every ten seconds to tell me I'm reading a line wrong*'."

"*Sure*." Neil rolled his eyes. "And you aren't suggesting this break just so that you can ask me more about Charlie and his article?" Adam had the grace to look sheepish, at least, but Neil had to admit—a break didn't sound like the worst idea at the moment. "Fine," he relented. "We can take a *little* break."

"Nice!"

Laughter floated over from across the room. An old friend came back to Neil in the form of horrific, jealousy-induced pain writhing around in his stomach—made only more nostalgic by the lingering taste of tea in his mouth, the familiarly boring-looking tomes sat on the shelves. The clock ticking over the fireplace, its golden hands moving too slow.

It wasn't a little unnerving, how everything could be so much the same and yet so different; how something could resemble the past, and yet be carved out of the harrowing cliff face of the future.

Neil stood, brusquely. "However, *I'm* taking this to wash up," he declared, picking up the tray—empty, save for the piles of crumbs and drained mugs. "And in the meantime, *you're* going to figure out your line."

Adam gave him a curious once-over—looking over towards Todd and Ginny, then back to Neil. He nodded. "I'll take what I can get."

Neil nodded back, then shimmied his way between the couch and the coffee table—a little too eager to leave the living room, to be away from the soft merriment that was sinking its fangs into his eardrums. Tableware clinked and Neil's shoes tapped against the floor as he fled quickly to the kitchen, probably terribly obvious; Adam, no doubt, had noticed Neil's odd behaviour.

But Neil didn't feel embarrassed by that.

It wasn't like he was the *only* one acting peculiar.

When Neil had first arrived at the Danburry's (an affair he was well-accustomed to, by now), he'd known something was wrong as soon as the whitewashed wood of the door had swung inward. Ginny, appearing from behind it, had stood in the frame stiffly—easily explained away by her still being unused to standing upright, even a little wobbly on her injured side. However, the same couldn't explain the melancholy that ringed her eyes, made all the more obvious by the plastered-on smile which hadn't reached them.

"*Neil.*" The word had been careful, measured, read right off of the

page with little inflection added. She'd hesitated a moment before fussing him in, all of her mannerisms the same as before—but not done nearly as naturally.

"*Hey*," Neil had said, voice breathy from the ride. "*Sorry I'm a little late. Had some history study to catch up on*." He'd rubbed his hands together, trying not to notice how Ginny faced him at an unclean angle; torso turned away, face looking off to his side. "*Is— Is everybody here?*"

"*Yes, yes*," Ginny had muttered, a touch dismissively. She'd then begun limping through to the living room, not checking to see if Neil had been following or not.

Neil had followed.

He'd walked into the living room he was now so well-acquainted with, his stare grazing over the familiar furniture to see Adam—who'd already been sat down on the couch, and had waved at Neil once he'd entered. Across from him, naturally, had been Todd, who had had much the opposite reaction; Todd shied away, absorbing himself into the task of staring into the crackling fireplace—looking as if he wished he would be swallowed up by it.

Neil had understood the feeling.

"*So*," Ginny had announced, coming back out of the kitchen with a tray of steaming mugs and piled pastries. "*I thought we'd pair up and run lines with each other. Think that would be much easier*." She'd set down the food and drink on the coffee table, before whipping her attention back up to Neil. "*How should we pair up, Neil?*"

Neil had cast his eyes around the circle. Adam had been lounging

forwards out of the couch cushions, reaching for one of the loaded plates. Ginny had been creasing her eyes, mouth set flatly as she watched Neil deliberate his options, making him feel as if he were being watched by the teacher during a test. And Todd—

"*Adam*," Neil had coughed out. "*I'll, uh— I'll go with Adam.*" He'd tried for a grin, hadn't kidded himself into believing that it was any more convincing than Ginny's. "*We share a lot of our scenes, so it'd be for the best.*"

Neil swore that Ginny had sighed under her breath, deflating a little—just like she'd done the week prior, slumping against the doorway before hopping back inside. Now that she'd had the strength to stand herself up, though, she'd only shaken her head as she walked towards a spot on the rug. She'd made sure to grab two mugs off of the tray first, alongside an assortment of pastries.

"*I'll run lines with Todd, then*," she'd declared. She motioned for Todd to come join her, which he had—scampering across the room, pointedly dodging Neil with both his path and gaze. Neil had gritted his teeth, but said nothing.

Then Neil had gone over and settled opposite Adam, who Neil had been very quickly becoming extremely glad to have invited; the other boy's presence gave Neil an out, a way to avoid the stiflingly stunted conversations he'd been half-having with Ginny.

(It also gave him a distraction, taking Neil's mind off of all the *none* conversations he *wasn't* having with Todd.)

Neil had slumped his bag on the floor, sinking backwards into the plush furniture, exhausted despite not having yet started. The seat had been warm from where Todd had occupied it, the lingering heat feeling as if it was torching Neil's skin. He'd tried busying himself by

pulling out his script booklet, but to little success—he'd had to hide his grimace as he looked back up at Adam, trying to conjure forth some of the genuine gratitude he was feeling for the other boy. If Adam had noticed, he hadn't said as much; he'd only swapped polite conversation with Neil before they'd begun running lines, neither mentioning the elephantine tension in the room. Or Ginny's standoffish demeanour. Or Todd's…

Instead, they had fallen into a rhythm; Adam would read aloud his lines, and then Neil would test and tease any and all of Adam's annunciations until they were both satisfied with the outcome. It had been like how Neil had described it earlier, in the words Adam had just before recited back to him—it felt as if Neil was a gardener, cutting and knotting branches until the form was perfectly refined. After a while, they'd transitioned back to conversation, with Neil mentioning Charlie's… *endeavour*… to the other boy.

Which had led him here, letting the tray he held fall beside the sink with a dull clatter. The kitchen of the Danburry's household was normally just as lovely as the rest of the residence—and only *almost* as lovely as the family that lived within its walls. Neil could barely appreciated it now, though. The cold of the tiles on the floor seeped into his shoes, the light bleeding in through the window was a dulled grey, and the smell of the spices festooning the cupboards made his head spin.

Neil ran the taps as he swallowed down his dizziness, grabbing one of the used mugs off of the tray and filling it with water. He turned it over, rinsing it as he pulled a dishcloth off of a hook on the wall. The water was scalding, but Neil let it be. He was used to the temperature, having scrubbed dishes at home until his hands had been raw with blisters. (His father had said it would build character, teach Neil the worth of hard work. All Neil had really learnt, though, was how to button up his shirt despite the tips of his fingers being pocked with sores.)

Neil hummed along to the rushing water—letting the sound fill his ears, bubble up his throat. It was familiar, comfortable. Painful.

It was also reminiscent of the sounds filling the scene scored into Neil's mind, the noise calling to mind a very specific brook and its babbling. An image of the moon came to him, split as it had been into ribbons of rippling white, splayed across the glossy ebony surface of the stream. Neil imagined that amidst the baying of the pipes within the kitchen walls he could hear the soft, spoken words; the whispered poetry, the hitch of his own throat. He could feel it, too, the heat of breath close on his own—

Acute pain knifed up the length of his arm, Neil having held his hand under the boiling water too long. He yelped, flinching away—still gripping onto the mug—and twisted the tap off with a pained yank. He deposited the thoroughly washed mug onto the drainboard, reaching to turn on the cold water to soothe his injury.

Socked footsteps, the gentle clinking of porcelain, and a sharp, quiet intake of breath stopped him. Neil's hand froze, suspended midair. He spun around.

In the doorway stood Todd, holding his and Ginny's own mugs and plates. His eyes were glued to the tile, his mouth small and chewed on. He'd lost his voice somewhere between sitting on the rug with Ginny and stepping into the kitchen, not saying anything as Neil took him in. Not that Neil had expected him to say anything—

After all, he hadn't said anything the entire ride back from the cave, all the way to the Danburry's' street. Neil had dropped Todd off in the same dark alley that Neil had waited within earlier that night, a dismal bookend to the evening. The meeting had come to its close shortly after Charlie had revealed his machinations, the rest of the poets losing their energy as the discomfort of the situation dawned on them; Knox, specifically, had stormed off into the night as soon as they were all out of the woods. Neil hadn't called out after him, had only nodded briskly to the rest of the boys as he and Todd mounted the bicycle.

Todd's hands had hovered above Neil's shoulders the entire ride, only ever tracing over the fabric of Neil's coat—never fully committing to holding on fast. Neil had pedalled fast and hard to ensure both of them would be in bed at a reasonable hour, ending up sweaty and sweltering despite the cold. He'd thought about how Todd's arms had once felt, cool and comfortable, wrapped around his midsection. He'd thought about asking the boy to snake them around him again—before he'd set his head down, chiding himself, forcing his focus back onto the road.

Once they'd reached their location, Neil had barely gotten a mumbled *anything* from the other boy—and even then, what he did get was little more than a mumbled goodbye and a stammered-out apology after Neil had had to remind him that he needed the duffle coat back. Todd had shucked the clothing off quickly, handing it over with a dumping of cloth—a dropping of dead weight into Neil's hands. Todd had shivered, and then shambled off into the night. Neil hadn't even been able to say his own goodbye.

Todd had just left, without another word.

And Neil had just let him.

Neil gulped around the lump in his throat as he shook the water off of his hands. "Do you… need help with those?"

Todd shuffled around him, gingerly placing his own tableware on the countertop. He didn't speak, didn't even raise his eyes.

"Todd—" Neil tried.

Todd reached over, tugging at the handle of the sink faucet until it sputtered out water. Todd held out his hand, and Neil almost reached over to grab it—before he realised what he was doing, keeping his hand close and clammed up by his side.

"I-I c-can take it from h-here," Todd stuttered. It was the most words he'd spoken to Neil since the meeting had spiralled downward.

"Todd—" Neil began to protest.

"*Don't*," Todd had begged, voice strained. It was, again, one of the rare moments when the boy sounded so certain of his words—in a way that he never normally was.

If it were Charlie, Neil would've pressed the issue, demanding… *something*. If it were Mr. Keating, he would've tried approaching the matter from a different angle, steer the conversation towards the topic from there. If it were anybody else, asking Neil that very same request, it would've been different—Neil would've *done*, would've continued. Attempted it again.

But it was Todd.

So Neil *didn't*.

Neil snapped his mouth shut, staring down at Todd's hand—at the lines inset on his palm, the grooves of his fingers, the taper into the boy's wrist. He almost jumped when Todd closed his grip, before opening it out once more—furling and unfurling, like a delicate flower. Neil bit the flesh of his cheeks until tears sprang in his eyes.

“N-Neil,” Todd said. “The c-cloth?”

“Oh,” Neil answered, dumbly. “Yeah— Yeah.”

Neil dropped the dishcloth into Todd’s hand, careful as to not brush his fingers against Todd’s own. As the material draped itself over Todd’s palm, his hold tightened again, and Todd turned coldly away. Just like that, any and all conversation which had existed between the two boys was ended—in that moment, and in every moment. Words came up dead in Neil’s mouth, and he nursed them between his teeth just as he nursed the minor scald on his hand, the one still stinging at his nerve endings.

Neil wheeled around, walking away as fast as his stride would allow him. As he did, he listened to the splashing of dishes start up behind him—gentle, careful, nothing but dainty swipes of smooth cloth to pick cleanly at any pesky crumbs. It may as well have been an orchestra the way it made Neil stutter in his steps, every muscle in his body fighting him from moving away. He felt a dull ache form in his skull, probably from clenching his jaw.

Neil exited the kitchen, not looking back.

“Neil, I—! Oh.” Adam stopped as Neil slumped himself onto the couch, collapsing with little and less grace. “Uh… I was going to tell you about—”

“Does it work?”

Adam appeared taken aback, almost comically so, as he processed Neil’s words. He picked his script booklet up from off the table, holding it out in front of him. “You mean the line?”

Neil shook his head. “What you said earlier,” he clarified, picking at the fuzz of the blanket beside him. “About doing something big. To capture some… *girl’s*… attention.”

“Oh. That.” Adam glanced over towards where Ginny was now sitting, alone, pleasantly reading through some novel Neil had glimpsed on her bedside table before. “Well… it depends on the girl, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” Neil asked, too quickly.

The edges of Adam’s lips ticked upwards into a grin, one he quickly stifled as he continued. “Sometimes, running into a packed classroom and openly declaring your love—for the whole world to see—works. But sometimes… it *won’t*.” He rubbed his hands together, humming in contemplation. “For others, maybe try something a little more…”

“…subtle?” Neil finished.

Adam clicked his fingers. “Exactly. *Subtle*.” He leant forward suddenly. “Though… there’s something that’s even more important than that.”

“What is it?”

Adam let his smile break through. “Well, it’s what we’ve been talking about. Knowing what you *want*.” He laid backwards again, crossing his arms as he sunk into the cushions. “You don’t want to do what your friend did— Go in without knowing what you’re going in *for*.”

“You sound very certain about all of this,” Neil huffed.

“It’s cause I’ve seen it all before.” Adam laughed. “Some of the guys on the football team are *clueless*. They’ll do crazy things for a girl’s attention— Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.” Adam peered back over to the opposite corner of the room, checking to see if Ginny was paying attention or not. Seeing that she wasn’t, Adam continued —his voice lowered, a hand placed to hide his mouth from her. “You know, Chris started dating Chet because he broke some guy’s arm for her.”

Neil balked. “He *what*?”

“Some idiot on the other team was making gross comments about the cheerleaders all game,” Adam explained, nonchalant. “Chet threw a punch, tackled him, forced him to apologise— Got a red card for it.” He shrugged. “But he also ended up dating Chris a week later, so.”

Neil pinched the bridge of his nose. “*Okay*, moving past… *that*… you’re saying I need to figure out what I want before I do anything?”

“I mean, were we talking about you?” Adam asked, smirking.

Neil felt his face flush. “*H-Hypothetically*.”

Adam’s simper only deepened. “Well, *hypothetically*— Yes, you do.”

“I… I’m pretty sure I know what I want,” Neil tried.

“Do you?”

Did he?

Neil grabbed the script he'd cast aside earlier, waving it in Adam's face. "S-Speaking of figuring out what you want— Did you manage to *figure out* what you *wanted* from the line?"

Adam gave Neil a look, lips closed over his knowing smile. He was apparently deciding to give the other boy a break, however, because he flipped open his booklet instead of pressing Neil any further. "I did, actually! Here, what about this—" Adam found the line that he'd not so long ago failed to read out convincingly, cleared his throat, squared his shoulders as he repeated it once more. It wasn't spoken with the anger requested by the stage directors, nor with the struggling disinterest that Adam had used before—instead, Adam gave the line a snideness to its step, his pitch tilting into a breathy whine at the end, as if snipped. It was… better. Much better. It was also—

"*Subtle*," Neil stated. Then he whistled, impressed. "That… works."

"Always does," Adam sang back, face triumphant. "It's all about knowing what you want, Neil."

Neil bit his tongue between his incisors. "Yeah, yeah," he said. "Since you've gotten your spirit back, why don't we keep going, huh?"

"Alright," Adam agreed, his interest back up and burning. "Although…"

"Hm?" Neil mumbled.

“Oh, I was just thinking…” Adam licked his thumb, turned over the page. “Once you do figure something out—*hypothetically*—if you ever need help around Ridgeway, I know it like the back of my hand.” He looked up at Neil, winking. “If you need to know which classroom to get into, or whose locker is whose…”

Neil scoffed, ready to tell that Adam he didn’t need it—that he was grateful for the offer, that he’d keep it in mind, but that he *didn’t need it*. His lips were parted, ready to convey that to Adam, when—

Todd walked in from the kitchen, drying his hands on his trousers. He’d rolled up his sweater sleeves—revealing his fingers, which were reddened from his dishwashing. His hair had fallen over his face, but he’d clearly not wanted to wet it by fixing it; now that his arms were no longer dripping onto the floorboards, he pushed away the sandy-blonde strands, combing them out of his eyes. He spotted Neil staring, startled, and quickly escaped back over to where Ginny was looking up from her novel. Then the two were lost to their own world again, and the enamel on Neil’s teeth was going to break—

He spun back to see Adam’s wry smile, watching Neil watch Todd and Ginny. Neil felt his cheeks crawl with heat.

“Why don’t—” Neil’s voice came out harsh and squeaky. He coughed, attempted it again. “Why don’t we just get back to practising?”

Adam nodded, oh-so innocently turning back to his script. “Where were we?” he inquired, the grin on his face evident in his voice. “Ah, right— *My gentle Puck! Come hither*…”

Neil put his head down, staring at the words printed on the page. He already knew them by heart, had committed them to memory so completely that they were likely scratched into the inside of his skull. The script was a formality, hardly necessary in truth. Neil stared at it

anyhow, drilling his gaze into the useless lines, wishing that he didn't know them as well as he did.

Because if he didn't, maybe they would do a better job at pulling his attention away from Adam's words—the ones circling around his head like vultures, making him dizzier and dizzier.

Neil scoffed under his breath.

Of course he knew what he *wanted*—

—didn't he?

Neil was helpless not to, for the dozen'th time, peek back over to where Ginny and Todd were reciting lines. Ginny. And Todd. The first two people in the room that he'd met; that he'd gone to such great lengths to talk with, hang out with, become acquainted with—now, somehow, all of that seemed to matter little. Ginny was turning her shoulder, Todd was… Neil couldn't find the words to speak with Todd.

Was any of *this* what he wanted?

Neil wanted a great many amount of things; he wanted to be an actor, to live out his life under the limelight of a stage. He wanted to be free from the future laid out before him, to be unshackled from the fate designated unto him by his father—one where he spent every day taking temperatures and testing reflexes, syringing out bloods and stitching up skin wounds. Neil wanted nights in the woods, aged poetry collections lining his walls in bookshelves which threatened to spill over. He wanted time huddled with his friends in the cave, laughing as one of them tried and failed to get a fire started with muddy tinder.

Neil wanted Todd to be there. He wanted the boy to slot into his place in the puzzle, the one that Neil was now starkly aware existed. He wanted Ginny to be able to look him in the eyes again, to speak to him with the same fondness she always had; the one which rolled off of her words like the scent of flowers in spring.

But most of all, Neil wanted Todd to *talk* to him. To stare straight at him with those powder blue eyes, to explain away all of the strangeness fluttering in Neil's stomach. Neil wanted Todd to take his hands in his again, to raise his fingers to Neil's cheek and—

And—

Neil tore his gaze away from the pair on the carpet.

God.

God.

Adam was right.

Neil *didn't* know. He didn't know, and he never would—never *could*. There was a shard of something unknown stuck in his chest, nestled between the atria of his heart; the more Neil dug for it, the more it cut him from within.

So he stopped searching. He hunched over his script, glared at it until the page blurred into nothing but whiteness, radio static swirling in his vision.

And, perfectly still, focus never straying from ahead—he waited for his line.

Chapter End Notes

title from "Thank You" yes I'm determined to get at least one lyric from every song on the album

You Say You Like All Of My Attitude

Chapter Summary

> Neil's mulling everything over in his head, as Charlie faces the consequences of his own actions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Adam was right about a lot of things, turns out.

The most primary example being, Neil thought as he fell into the armchair, exhausted, *when he said that Charlie is an idiot.*

Which, *no,* the boy had never stated directly, *technically*; but in so many words, Adam had pretty clearly spelled the sentiment out—a sentiment which had only earned Neil's endorsement more and more as the Monday had drawn on.

The trouble had started, predictably, as soon as the Welton newspaper had begun to circulate around the benches at breakfast (with Charlie's particularly *treasonous* addition snuck within its pages, like the Greek soldiers hidden within the Trojan Horse). Charlie, naturally, had relished in how every one of the students whispered between themselves—and not only the students; the staff were also gossiping, gasping affrontedly as they scanned the papers held out in front of them. Still warm from Welton's own printing press, the news had inevitably reached Mr. Nolan, after which all students and staff were called into the hall for an *emergency assembly*.

Where Charlie had proven that he was not only an idiot who could write an article—

He was also an idiot who wished desperately to be *expelled*.

Neil had been sat beside Knox when the first few rings of the phone had echoed out over the sea of heads, all of which had turned swiftly to investigate the noise—including Neil and Knox's heads, despite the fact they already had a good clue of who it would be. Neil had had to stifle a laugh, rolling his eyes. Knox had looked… unreadable. He'd disappeared shortly after Charlie was sequestered away to Nolan's office, muttering something that none of the other gathered poets could make out. It was just the four of them as they waited around, antsy about what could possibly be happening behind the closed door.

Evidently, they were all about to find out. Charlie had recovered enough to fish out his bongos and sunglasses from his wardrobe, leading the curious crowd of boys into the common room so they could hear his tale.

"Nolan dragged me to his office," Charlie recounted, having settled atop an armchair beside the fireplace. The flickering light of the flames played across his face as he spoke, painting dramatic shadows over his wicked smile. "Slammed the door behind me. Told me to wipe the smirk off my face—"

Neil shut his eyes as the boy began to pat at his pair of drums, tuning out the noise—he'd had enough of it today, if he was being honest. He cast his thoughts, instead, back to what Adam had said about Charlie, to what Adam had said about *him*. About the whole damn day, from settling atop the Danburry's' couch to his… *conversation* with Todd in the kitchen. Neil winced, laying a hand over his brow as he sunk down in his seat.

So…

They *weren't* going to discuss it.

That was… *fine*.

Neil could *handle* not discussing something. He was terrific at keeping silent on a topic, almost as talented at it than he was at its opposite; for as adept as Neil was at performing for a crowd, soliloquising his character's deepest desires out into the trembling, spotlit air, he could also just as skilfully keep his damn trap shut if he needed to. There were a great number of *something's* which he'd never shared with his friends, an even greater number he'd never told to his teachers—*God*, the list of *something's* Neil couldn't even approach with his father ran longer than the average Oxford dictionary. At the top of said list, naturally, was Neil's role in the production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, something he'd thus far managed to keep a secret from his parents. *That* clearly had to have required *some* sort of skill at tiptoeing around truths on his part, *some* knowledge in when not to speak—

But there was a problem.

That problem being, (as it was so often becoming nowadays, it seemed to Neil), that it was… *Todd*.

If it were anybody else, Neil would've been easily able to hold himself back. But it *wasn't* anybody else; it was *Todd*, and that was an issue.

Because Neil had never held back with Todd before. It wasn't exactly something within Neil's control, either—it wasn't so much a rule as it was a law of nature, a universal constant, both immovable object and unstoppable force. Todd deserved the truth, and Neil would always tell it to him; Neil's mouth would spill over with words, his voice starting and refusing to stop, not until Neil pinched his own lips shut with his fingers.

If Todd's poetry was brilliant (and it *was*), then Neil had to chase the boy outside beneath the streetlamps to inform him of such. If Neil had to later apologise for reading said poetry and chasing the boy outside for it, Neil's tongue was already forming the sentence before Neil could think twice. If Neil wanted Todd at a society meeting, there were no laws of gods or men that could hold him back from telling the boy so.

Except now there *were*.

"He began this whole speech he'd prepared. Told me that I wasn't the first to try and get expelled, and that I wouldn't be the last." Charlie uttered. "He was behind me. That's when I heard it; a screeching, wobbly *creak*."

Now, there was a barrier of sorts—an invisible hand, tightening around Neil's throat whenever he was in proximity to the other boy. A dryness which crept up his oesophagus, rendering his voice hoarse and useless; a sensation which petrified his tongue into nothing more than a stone clogging up his airway. He'd barely been able to speak with Adam after escaping from the kitchen at the Danburry's, instead stewing on the couch as both Ginny and Todd happily danced around him. Adam had only seemed sympathetic, which made Neil feel leagues worse—Adam had been the one person under that roof willing to converse with him normally, and Neil hadn't even been able to grant him *that*.

Adam's words came to him again, unbidden.

What did Neil *want*? What did he wish for?

Well, for one, Neil wished it hadn't gone the way it had that Friday night—how much simpler would things be between *everyone* if it hadn't? If Neil hadn't been so drunk on the adrenaline rushing

through his veins; if it hadn't been so smoky, so that Todd would never have choked on the air as he did; if the moon hadn't hung so gloriously in the sky, pulling the two boys from the cave as easily as it pulled the sea into its tides.

If Neil had considered, at any moment before Knox came out to fetch them, that perhaps he and Todd had been away for just a little too long. That they should've headed back in ages ago, that the other poets were probably worrying about them becoming lost in the woods. That maybe Neil could stand to keep his space more, could stand to focus anywhere else than on how cozy Todd seemed as he collapsed onto the bank—could stand to try harder to will away the tug in his chest, the one which pulled him ever closer towards the other boy, wrapped in the borrowed coat which swallowed him whole—

Neil wished that that he'd never borrowed that damn duffle coat. That instead of his roommate, it had been Spaz, or Stick, or *hell*, even *Hopkins* that Neil had asked. Hopkins was tall, yes, and his coat would've led to similar complications, but that wouldn't have mattered in the end—because Hopkins never would've even allowed Neil to borrow it in the first place. Meaning Neil would have had to substitute, use some other article of clothing such as a blazer, or a jumper, something which wouldn't have made Todd seem so warm and inviting in the waxing moonlight.

Neil wished they had just stayed in the goddamn cave.

"*Creak*," Charlie continued. "Footsteps on the worn floorboards, Nolan creeping towards me."

But Neil, also, was a *liar*—a liar who *didn't* wish for anything about the night to have been different; who was glad that everything had gone the way it had.

He was glad to have invited Todd over, gladder still that the boy had actually come. He didn't wish for any difference in the way Todd's fingers had dug into his shoulders during their ride, nor in the way the fabric of Todd's borrowed coat had curtained over the other boy's features. He *certainly* didn't wish for any difference in the way Todd laughed his soft, breathy laughter all night, the type which seemed to flow out so easily when he was around Neil.

If things *had* been different, so much would've gone unexperienced. Neil would've missed the cool, gentle brush of Todd's leg pressed up against his, would've missed Todd's lengthier and lengthier dissertations on what determined a poem's quality. Neil would never have realised how Todd slid so effortlessly into a slot that he hadn't even known existed until that night—filling out the group in a manner which felt so *correct*.

And the more Neil thought about it, the more sure he became that he didn't wish to rescind *any* part of the night, terrifyingly implicative or otherwise. He didn't wish that he'd uninvited Todd, didn't wish that any step of his plan to transport the boy had gone awry. He didn't wish that Todd *hadn't* sidled up next to him while they watched the other boys read out poetry, bicker about the fire, dissolve into chaos as the night went on.

He didn't wish that Todd hadn't given him an excuse to drag the other boy outside, to sit down close to him beside the brook, to talk rapturously with him as the stars glittered above them. He didn't wish that Todd hadn't found his English notebook, hadn't discovered his own poetry copied within it. Neil didn't wish that he hadn't been given the chance to tell Todd, to his moonlit face, that he did, in fact, have worth—a worth that far surpassed what could be conveyed in money, material, or language.

He didn't wish that he hadn't let himself move closer. Part of Neil must've *wanted* to—why else would he do it? Why else would he lean in so close he could feel Todd's breath ghost over his lips, drawing him so near that he could've—?

“*Creak, creak*,” Charlie narrated, the pace of drumming quickening. “He started walking around to my left. *Creak*.”

Neil groaned, tipping backwards in his chair. That damn shard, hidden in the folds of his damn heart. There was a piece missing, but Neil didn’t dare reach out for it—and without it, nothing made sense. He wished, he didn’t wish. He was getting dizzy from narrowing down what it was that he wanted, chasing the specks floating in the corners of his vision, the ones which were always swept away when he tried to look at them. It didn’t matter how quick he was to flick his eyes; they always outran his focus.

“‘*Assume the position, Dalton*,’ he’d said to me—”

“Oh, would you be *quiet*?”

Neil covered his mouth, convinced the words had sprung from his own lips. He was surprised to see that they *hadn’t*, that all of the boys crowding around Charlie—some from a nearby armchair, like Neil, most kneeling down on the carpet—were not pivoting to stare at him. Instead, all eyes were turned towards the door.

Within the frame of which, with his arms crossed, stood Knox.

“Overstreet!” Charlie drawled, unfazed. He plucked his sunglasses off of his head, laying them back atop his hair. “Took you long enough to join the party.”

Knox marched forward, the sea of bodies on the floor parting as students scrambled out of his way. “Are you proud of yourself?” he demanded, a steeliness to his voice which Neil hadn’t heard from the

boy before.

Charlie only laughed in response, resting his forearms atop the bongos in his lap. “Of course I’m proud— What, should I not be?” He leered up at Knox, an unspoken challenge poking out from his bared teeth.

“It was a lame stunt you pulled, *Dalton*,” Knox remarked. “I wouldn’t be proud of it, if I were you.”

Charlie laid back, idly patting at his drums. “Yeah, well, if you *were* me, you couldn’t have done it at *all*,” he taunted. “You need a certain mettle, Knox, a certain grit—”

Knox sputtered. “*Mettle?*” he repeated. “You do… *that*… and you call it *mettle*?”

Neil sat forward in his seat as the two boys stared each other down— Charlie still had an easy grin on his face, but the lines where it met his cheeks were growing tauter by the second. Knox’s arms were still crossed over his chest, tucked under his elbows, wrapping his torso so tightly Neil felt asphyxiated simply looking at them.

“Mettle, bravery, courage,” Charlie listed, tone still eerily light despite how he forced out the words. “Call it whatever you like, really. It takes guts to take action, Knox.” He yawned, long, loud, and exaggerated. “Not like you’d know anything about that, I suppose.”

“You’re taking *action*?” Knox repeated.

“What, is there an echo in here—?”

“You’re taking *action*,” Knox interrupted, saying back the sentence more for himself than for anyone else. “You got paddled by Nolan, Charlie— Was that part of you taking *action*?”

Charlie breathed in sharply through his teeth, grimacing. “*Oof*. Sore subject, Overstreet,” he whined. “And you never know— Maybe it *was*. Standing up against the system. Fighting the norm.” He rubbed the side of his rear end with one hand, placing the other over his chest. “Some casualties need to be taken, for the sake of the greater good.”

The boys that hadn’t yet peeled away—and weren’t too busy sharing confused glances with each other, as the rest of the poets were doing themselves—laughed. It was a weak, unassured sound, and one that Neil didn’t partake in. He was too busy studying Knox’s face; the creases on the forehead, his mouth hanging slightly ajar.

“You’re… an idiot,” Knox said, shaking his head, baffled. “Oh my God… you’re an *idiot*.”

“An idiot with one hell of a story to tell my grandkids about one day. Though I might have to censor—”

“Do you take *anything* seriously?” Knox snapped.

Charlie blinked, as did Neil. Knox was the last person in the group to raise their voice—even Meeks could be more easily convinced, given a fruitless two hours of tinkering away at a wire system which refused to budge, directly followed by an overlarge textbook dropped on his foot. (Neil had seen the lowerclassman that had dropped the book in the hall later that very same month; he’d given Neil’s group a wide berth, staring at Meeks with eyes wide with fear.)

Knox, on the other hand, wasn't so much *quiet* as he was *easy*; tender and pleasant when he talked, tone fuzzy like fur at its fringes. Even when he was arguing, he always seemed more concerned with conveying his point rather than getting involved in a shouting match —which used to infuriate Charlie to no end, offending his enthusiasm for all things *yelled*. Knox could still be as loud as he liked, had done as such many a time, but he was never *sharp* with his words.

At least, he *usually* wasn't.

"Of— Of course I take things seriously," Charlie responded, plastering back on his grin. "I take *seizing the day* seriously. *That's* what this is all about. I'm thinking for myself, just like the Captain taught us to."

Knox sighed, exasperated. "The Captain didn't teach us to *intentionally* piss off the entire school board, Charlie."

"Hm. Did we go to the same lessons?"

Neil watched as Knox lowered his hands to his sides. He imagined that no one else was paying such close attention; none of the boys seemed to be looking too carefully, focused instead on the words being slung across the room rather than their speakers. Neil was likely the only one who noticed the movement of Knox's hands, as well as the slight tremor they held.

"*This* is taking it too far," Knox argued. "*This* isn't what Mr. Keating meant when he—"

"Oh, because you're an expert when it comes to what Mr. Keating taught us," Charlie scoffed. "Because you know all about taking action in your life. *Sure*."

“Talk to him,” Knox tried. “He’ll tell you—”

“*You* talk to him,” Charlie retorted. “Since you’re so confident—”

“What do you *think* I’ve been doing all afternoon?” Knox’s voice raised in pitch, incredulity bleeding through. “I was talking to him about your little demonstration in the assembly—” his face paled slightly, and he swallowed before continuing. “He— He thinks what you did was *shit*, too.”

Neil’s ears perked up as Charlie’s smile tightened impossibly further. Knox had a dire expression, one which he didn’t seem to be enjoying wearing. Squinting, Neil could just make the emotion in his eyes—it was something like pain, like hurt, like… concern?

“Pfft,” Charlie replied, laughing shakily. “As if.”

“He did,” Knox insisted. “He said it was stupid of you to do.”

“Bull,” Charlie deadpanned. “The Captain— The Captain would understand. I’m just sucking the marrow out of life, you know?”

Knox clicked his tongue, casting his gaze down at the floor. “*Sucking the marrow out of life doesn’t mean choking on the bone*,” he quoted. He raised his head back towards Charlie. “Do you wanna guess who told me that, today, Dalton?”

As the two continued, more and more boys began to filter out of the common room—walking as stealthily as possible, throwing anxious

glances over their shoulders as they snuck out. Neil wondered whether or not the caution was due to Knox and Charlie's looks, each growing more and more murderous by the second; more likely it was because the noise was escalating to the point where Dr. Hager was certain to march in any second, handing out demerits to anyone he suspected of being involved. Neil glanced at the door worryingly, now keenly aware of the building racket.

Charlie, however, clearly harboured no such awareness. "I don't believe you," he snarled, the strained grin he had on before finally cracking—giving way to squeezed teeth, flared nostrils, and a lethally sour tone. "If it was that important, the Captain would've come up and told me himself—"

"He would've told you exactly what I just said!" Knox exclaimed. "He would've warned you not to plan any more of your little antics, which I, for one, think he's spot-on about—"

"*God*, who put a stick up your ass?" Charlie growled. He shot forward in his seat, hands gripping onto the flat of his thighs, arms bending as he pitched over his bongos. "I already got paddled, Overstreet— And now what, you had to go fink on me to the Captain, then, too?"

"I didn't go there to *fink* on you, Charlie—"

"Then why'd you go?"

"Because I was *worried*—!"

"Ah, *of course*," Charlie sneered, falling backwards onto his chair. "You were *worried*. Well, Overstreet, good news—you didn't need to be!" He swept out his hand, startling the other poets as he gestured towards them. "I was never going to sell any of you out, none of you

were ever going to get into trouble. You were all going to be peachy, no matter what." Charlie barked out a laugh, shallow and mirthless. "I'm so sorry if I *worried* you, though."

Knox turned away, raking a shivering hand through his hair, dishevelling his fringe—he stared off into space, chewing on his lip. "You don't—" He stopped, cleared his throat, began again. "You don't get it, do you?"

Charlie's face split into a rueful smile, lips pulled back from the gums, eye twitching. "You're right. I *don't*. I really *don't* get why you're so damn upset, Overstreet— I really *don't* get what's got you so ticked off."

"You— You could've been *expelled*!" Knox spat, spinning on his heel, jabbing a finger in the other boy's face. It trembled between them. "You could've been kicked out of the school, Charlie! And the worst part… the worst part if that you don't even *care*."

"Ugh," Charlie grumbled, staring down into his lap at his drums—eyes piercing into the skin stretched over the wooden frame. "You sound just like Cameron, right now."

"Hey!" Cameron called out, still present.

"Actually no, you know what? You're worse, actually," Charlie uttered, darkly. He looked back up, narrowing his eyes. "At least Cameron sticks to his own goddamn business. What do you care, Overstreet? If I get expelled, I get expelled. It's my choice, *not* yours."

"I can't believe you," Knox replied. "I can't— You would've been happy getting expelled? You wouldn't even care? And all this for *what* — Just to say that girls should get into Welton?"

Charlie tapped the side of his drums with his fingers. Hard. “You say that like it wasn’t something *you* mentioned,” he ground out. “*You’re* the one who kept bringing it up, Overstreet.”

Neil glanced up curiously at Knox, who was pressing his lips into a thin line, cheeks blushing slightly. *This* he hadn’t heard before, and from the looks of the other poets, neither had they; Knox had never mentioned the concept of Welton admitting both sexes, at least, not in front of anyone else—*excluding* Charlie, apparently.

“So, really,” Charlie barrelled on, not even stuttering at Knox’s reaction. “I just *have* to ask— What’s so wrong with it now that *I’m* the one saying it?”

“You don’t actually believe it, that’s what’s wrong with it.”

Those words, Neil suddenly realised, *had* sprung from his own lips. Charlie and Knox both wheeled on him, as did the rest of the poets—as well as the rest of the remaining stragglers, only still here because they were either entertained by the argument or too afraid of interrupting to leave.

“What was that, Neil?” Charlie asked, slow, deliberate, disbelieving.

Neil coughed. “I said… I don’t think you actually believe that.”

Charlie’s mouth dropped ever-so-slightly, before he clamped his jaw back into its socket. “*Excuse you*, Neil,” he said, tilting his head to the side. “I don’t seem to remember asking you a damn thing—”

“He’s right, though, isn’t he?” Knox cut in. “You didn’t publish that article because *you* cared about Welton being co-ed. When I’d brought up that idea, you’d just *laughed*—”

“Maybe I changed my mind!” Charlie cried, mirroring Knox’s earlier action, stabbing a finger up at the other boy. “You don’t know *everything* about me, Overstreet!”

“I know you don’t give a damn about anyone but yourself,” Knox retorted, stepping dangerously close to Charlie. “*That’s* what this is all really about— You only care about *you* having fun, doing whatever *you* want, consequences be damned. So, what, you take something *I’ve* mentioned—”

“Oh, because *everything* I do has to concern you—”

“—and all for *what*? God, Charlie, *seizing the da*y doesn’t mean doing whatever you want, whenever you want, simply for the sake of it. Did you even *think*, for a *second*—”

“Whose side are you on, Knox?” Charlie hissed, leaping to his feet suddenly—his bongos tumbling out of his lap, colliding with the floor with nothing more than dull *thud*. “Nolan’s? *Keating’s*?” Charlie moved closer, scowling into the other boy’s face, forcing him back a little as Charlie laughed again. “Cause it sure as hell isn’t *mine*.”

Charlie stared down Knox, as pointed as obsidian. Neil looked between them—they were close, he realised. Too close not to have noticed how the other was quivering just as terribly, how the other was panting just as raggedly, how the other’s fists were just as white-knuckled as their own. Elsewhere in the common room, everyone else had turned still; waiting with bated breath for the final wave to break, the final blow to land, the final crash of thunder to bellow across the sky. Neil watched Knox’s lips move, forming words which died as they

came up his throat. Finally, Knox simply sighed once more, puffing up his chest—

And then he turned away and stormed out, the sound of his footsteps like a hammer hitting steel.

Charlie scoffed again, a hollow noise. Then he collapsed back onto his chair, his sunglasses jumping in their nest atop his hair—before falling out of it, clattering to the ground. Charlie didn't move to pick them up. Instead, he glared around the room, glowering at the remaining few boys still present.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" he barked. "Story-time's over. *Scram*."

That was all it took to send the rest of the once-impressive crowd bolting out of the door, muttering under their breaths about *curfew* and *getting to bed*. Charlie let them, and soon enough only the poets (minus one notable exception) were left lingering about, the only occupants of the previously bustling space.

"Well. Knox seemed… unhappy," Cameron observed. "*What*?" he yipped, as Meeks elbowed him in the stomach.

"I didn't know he was so worried about getting in trouble," Pitts commented, scratching at his chin. "Thought if you'd gotten over it, Cam, anyone could."

"I mean, it's not like I entirely disagree with Knox," Cameron mused. "It was definitely a little far, even for Charlie— *Hey*!" Meeks, after having elbowed Cameron again, then tried subtly to motion over to Charlie—who was currently simmering on his armchair, staring at the common room door.

“I don’t think it was about getting in trouble,” Neil said, quietly, as he studied Charlie—red in the face, hands bundling up the cloth of his pant legs. Neil turned away, addressing the other boys. “It wouldn’t make sense. It must’ve been something else.”

“Knox was definitely acting… *odd* Friday night,” Pitts commented.

“He’s been *acting odd* for a bit,” Meeks added, looking over at Neil. “‘*Something else*’ sounds about right.”

“But what could it be?” Cameron queried.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

All eyes spun back to Charlie, who was now staring down at the everything he’d dropped onto the carpet. His voice shook at its edges, in what Neil initially assumed to be anger—but as Charlie continued speaking, Neil began to think that *anger* wasn’t entirely right. It was closer to resignation, giving way to vitriol; a mix of both resentment and acceptance for the unfortunate hand fate had dealt him.

“It’s me,” Charlie explained, voice husky, nothing more than thoroughly *spent*. He threw up his hands, let them fall wearily into his lap. “He wouldn’t have gotten this pissed if it was someone else who’d pulled this. It’s just… me.”

The rest of the poets began to offer condolences—assuring Charlie that that wasn’t the case, that it was that pesky *something else* that Knox was mad at, not him. Neil wished he could’ve agreed with them, could’ve given his friend some small comfort, could’ve told him to his face that Knox would’ve been just as irritated if it were anybody else

so openly daring the school board to expel them.

But the words hadn't even been shaped in his mind before Neil knew them to be incorrect—and that if he'd offered them, they'd only ring false.

Because in a strange way, Charlie was *right*.

It had to be him. It had to be Charlie.

And it had to be Knox.

Because if it were anybody else in either of the boys' places, it wouldn't have been the same. Nobody else could've committed an act so provocative, so defiant, so *idiotic*—that was something uniquely *Charlie*, for better or for worse. And nobody else could've—*would've*—called him out on it such as Knox did; nobody else would've stared Charlie straight in the eye and told him what Knox had told him, in the exact manner in which Knox had spoken.

Charlie and Knox would often bicker. They'd often slink away together, off cooking up plans for Neil's sake. They'd often sit together in class, between class, in the common room and in the cave and in any of the other usual haunts of the poets. Charlie would steal flowers from the Welton gardens at Knox's suggestion, Knox would dump his meatballs onto Charlie's plate when he didn't want them—

Something clicked inside of Neil, an abrupt drawing together of loose ends—the pieces of scattered evidence he'd gathered, filed away in his mind's compartments, beginning to stitch together.

If it were anybody else.

Anybody else.

But it *wasn't.* It *couldn't* be.

Why was that?

"Did you really write that article because you wanted girls at Welton, Charlie?" Meeks inquired, words carefully schooled.

"Is that really so hard to believe?" Charlie answered, tone embittered.

"I mean—not to agree with Knox—but it *was* sort of out of the blue," Meeks said.

Charlie listlessly rolled his eyes. "Of course I'm serious about it." He looked over towards Neil, gaze sharp. "Despite what *some people* think."

Neil, humming with the revelation building in his brain, didn't rise to the bait. "I was just pointing something out, Charlie," he replied. "Didn't mean anything by it." Neil straightened in his seat, bouncing his leg. "*Although…*"

"*Although…*?" Charlie parroted.

"Well, it's like Meeks said." Neil waved over towards the red-headed

boy—who was now trying his damnedest to become invisible where he sat. “It seems out of the blue. Plus…” Neil recalled Adam’s words from earlier on the matter. “…you had to have known that admitting girls to Welton is *not* something they’re ever going to do, Charlie.”

“Yeah, so why publish an article about it?” Cameron butted in. Meeks elbowed him again. “Oh, so everyone else is allowed to say stuff, but I’m not?”

Charlie looked between the rest of the poets, face scrunching up. “Oh, so first Knox goes off to Mr. Keating, turning him against me—”

“I’m sure the Captain wasn’t as… harsh as Knox was making him out to be,” Neil tried. “If he’d been here himself, I’m sure he would’ve put it in a much better way—”

“But he *wasn’t* here,” Charlie huffed. “Only Knox. And after all that—All of you are just giving me shit, too.”

“We’re not giving you shit, Charlie,” Neil said.

“We’re just… curious,” Meeks supplied.

“Yeah, well, *shove* your curiosity. I’m serious, alright? I’ll prove it,” Charlie vowed, a low, dangerous tone creeping into his voice. “I’ll prove it to Knox. And all of you guys, too. See how you like it.”

“Charlie, if you do one more thing to land you in trouble—” Cameron warned.

“Oh, for God’s sake— It’ll be fine, okay?” Charlie snatched up his glasses and bongos from where they’d fallen, stashing the former in his pocket and the latter under his arm.

“You sure?” Neil asked.

Charlie met his eyes. “Trust me, Perry,” he muttered, as if it were a threat—which, knowing Charlie, it might’ve been. “I’m *sure*.” He grinned, without teeth. Then he stood up and stalked out of the room, leaving the other four boys to sit awkwardly around in the silence left in his wake.

“Should… we be worried?” Pitts asked.

“Absolutely,” Meeks answered, immediately.

“Without a doubt,” Cameron confirmed, nodding.

Neil, however, remained silent—the gears turning in his head as he watched the door click shut behind Charlie, the very same door that Knox had also stomped through moments earlier. Neil let his thoughts become a roar in his ears, as loud as the pulse beating in his chest.

Would Charlie have tried so hard, if it were any other poet shirking his attention? Would Knox have become so inflamed if it had any other boy interrupting Mr. Nolan with a mock telephone?

Would Neil have felt so inclined to pull Todd out of the cave, sit by him near the brook, if it had been anyone but *Todd*?

It had to be him. It *had* to be *him.*

Why?

Why did it have to be who it was? Why couldn't it be someone else that Knox knew, someone else that Charlie was friends with? Why couldn't it be any of the other poets—or even any of the other boys at the school?

Why *Charlie*? Why *Knox*?

Why *Todd*?

"Neil?"

He broke out of his stupor. "Sorry?"

Meeks was standing above him, staring down with a curious look on his face. Pitts and Cameron were walking towards the exit behind him, still discussing what could've possibly had Knox so incensed. Meeks tapped at his wristwatch. "Curfew," he said.

"Oh, right." Neil also stood, dusting himself off.

He was close. Neil could feel that shard just within reach, its cold face tracing against his fingertips. He felt the strings slowly untwisting, the strings that were wound so tightly around him, Knox, Charlie, Ginny —and Todd, of course. Always *Todd*.

Neil was so close to figuring out, finally, what he *wanted*.

He had a gathering suspicion that he already knew.

“So,” he said to Meeks, thumbing towards the door. “Shall we go?”

Chapter End Notes

title from "Add Up My Love"

see yall in two weeks sorry, (it will be worth it, trust 🫦🫦🫦)
thank you for reading as always, bye

You Know Me, You Know Me

Chapter Summary

Charlie proves a point to the other poets. It goes... as expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil picked at the peeling paint of the cave's god, reaching over beside him to where it sat atop its makeshift pedestal. He tried to recall a time when waiting for society meetings to begin had been more *exhilarating* than *nerve-wracking*—if he were to take a wild guess, he'd estimate the last time had been *at least* a fortnight ago. Of course, last week, all of Neil's fretfulness had mostly been for nought; he needn't have worried, in the end, about Todd taking too long to acclimatise, or him not fitting in with the rest of the poets, or him having a thoroughly unenjoyable time over the evening.

No, there were *other* matters that Neil certainly should have concerned himself more with that night. But the past was the past was the past, and now he had both the benefit of hindsight *and* his nascent revelation on his side. So, safe to say—

The lead weight in Neil's stomach, telling him that the winds were about to change for the worse, was a feeling to be trusted. The frantic bounce of his leg, the fiddling with his coat toggles, even him idly stretching an arm out to tamper with the god's paint job—an act of great sacrilege, no doubt—all of these were tells, promising a meeting to remember.

For better or for worse.

"Well," Cameron muttered, darkly, breaching the silence. "Charlie's late."

For worse. Definitely for worse.

"This doesn't bode well."

"It… certainly looks like an omen," Meeks agreed. "But you never know— Maybe Charlie is just late. I mean, when has he been on time for anything?" He added a dry chuckle, grafted awkwardly onto the end of his sentence.

Neil shook his head. "He's never been late to a *meeting*." Trying to suppress the dread worming its way through his gut, he cast his eyes over the licks of the crackling flame, towards where Knox was—Neil didn't know how else to describe it—the boy was *brooding*; spine hunched over, forearms draped across his knees, face flickering in the firelight.

Pitts, in the fuzzy fringes of Neil's vision, followed his gaze. He sat up, out of where he'd been lying horizontal on the mat that he and Meeks had 'found' on the roof of Welton—and then brought back to the cave, same as the stolen stepladder now serving as the god's pedestal. Those, plus the pilfered pillows, helped make the space seem more lived in, more than just an empty hole in a hill that the boys huddled in together every week. Though Cameron protested the appropriation of school property, even he had to admit it livened up the place—making it seem more like the sanctuary Neil considered it to be.

Pitts studied Knox, scratching at his chin, before blurting, "What do you think, Knoxious?" He pitched his head to the side, conversationally, whilst across the fire Neil winced—same as both Cameron and Meeks, if their equally pained expressions were anything to go off of.

It wasn't that Knox and Charlie had been acting strangely over the past few days. They had been anything but; attending classes as they always did, settling down in a corner of the common room for study group, cracking jokes with the rest of the poets. It was all scarily… *routine*. The only glaring deviation from the norm came, obviously, in their interaction—or, more accurately, the total lack thereof. There may as well have been a brick wall between them, for how utterly they were avoiding acknowledging the other's existence. Despite the subjects they shared, the intermediaries they conversed with, the seats they took so close to each other in the dining hall—they somehow managed to pretend as if the other boy simply didn't exist at all.

It wasn't even terribly noticeable, if one wasn't looking.

Neil was.

Neil had noticed.

And so had most of the other poets, clearly—Meeks was still of the opinion that they *had* to get over it eventually, that one blow-out wouldn't be enough to keep them apart for long. Pitts and Cameron had both agreed on the point, but Neil harboured his doubts. He thought on Charlie pressing Knox on his poem, on Knox chiding Charlie on his flower-gathering techniques, on the countless interactions Neil had squirrelled away over the weeks. He wasn't certain, but he had an inkling of the fuller picture; it was enough to see that something like this had been building up for a while now, a slow-boiling that had finally spilled over—and something like that couldn't be cleaned up over the timeframe of a couple *days*.

Point being, Neil wasn't sure what to expect from the topic of Charlie being brought up so brazenly in front of Knox—even going as far as to ask him for his opinion on the boy's most recent stunt.

Whatever Neil had expected, it wasn't a simple roll of the shoulders and a short snort of laughter through the nostrils.

"He has a *surprise* planned, remember?" Knox reminded them, as if it were necessary. "He was talking about it in the lab."

Pitts nodded sagely at the answer, standing up and settling down besides Meeks—who seemed to be in conflict, obviously wanting to impale the taller boy on his elbow for broaching the matter so blatantly; but then again, Knox hadn't really reacted, so it wasn't as if Pitts' method *didn't* work.

Meeks eventually came to a decision and elbowed him anyway, as Cameron rolled his eyes.

"Right. The surprise," he repeated. "That, I think, bodes *worse*."

Neil spun around to Meeks, who was retreating his offending arm unapologetically. "Any clue what it could be?"

Meeks shrugged. "You know as much as me. That being that… *he*… has only told us that he has *'plans'*." Meeks held up his fingers in air quotes on the word *plans*. "He didn't say what it was, or even what day."

"Perfect," Neil ground out. "Because the last time he had *plans* it went so well."

Cameron scoffed. "What's the bet that this is the one which gets him expelled?" he asked, in what was meant to be a joke. But it landed flatly among the other poets, who all glanced over towards the cave

entrance with expressions of both wariness and weariness—even Cameron's heart didn't seem to be in his own jape, his voice dipping before he even finished his sentence.

The air in the cave soured as a quiet fell upon the boys like a plague. Only the crackle of the fire and the frigid wind blowing outside filled the dead of the night, as the poets all exchanged looks—all except for Knox, who was still staring into the flames.

Neil waited until he couldn't anymore, leaping up onto his feet, hands clapped on his thighs. "Okay," he declared, "We may as well start the meeting—"

He was almost immediately interrupted by another noise outside, stark against the howling weather. He stopped in his speech as the noises filtered in, creeping through the cave like thieves. A rustling of crumbling leaves, the snapping of twigs trodden underfoot, a soft—

—giggling?

High-pitched giggling.

The lead in Neil's stomach tripled in weight, as Cameron cursed, "Oh, *God*—"

"Hey guys!"

The dread that Neil had felt before—and rightfully so, turns out—crawled up his throat, whitening into shock as it reached his face. He fared better than the other poets, however, managing to keep his jaw from lolling open in surprise. In response to the open-mouthed

astonishment he was greeted with, Charlie only lazily saluted; two fingers raised to his brow, flicked forwards as he tumbled into the cave—flanked by two girls, each with Henley uniforms peeking out from under their coats. The trio were all laughing under their breaths, as if in on some joke that only they were aware of. Charlie turned away from the poets, wheeling around to usher the two girls in.

"This is it— Of course you can come in, it's my cave—" One of the girls almost tripped, and Charlie gracefully caught her by the hand. "Careful," he warned, tone smiling, as the girl tried to smother a voiceless giggle in her palm. She looked up, ditzy, her face catching the glow of the fire as she met the poets' collective gaze.

Something about her struck Neil. He couldn't quite place it, but something in her appearance gave him pause; he studied her a little closer as she offered a polite, genial wave.

"Hi," she said, cheeks red from the cold.

Meeks shot smartly to his feet, and—being beneath where the ceiling dipped, as he was—hit his head on the way up, knocking his glasses crooked on his face. He rubbed at the forming bump on his scalp as he returned the wave. "Hey," he replied, readjusting his spectacles, schooling his face into a smile.

The girl smiled in kind, pushing up the apples of her cheeks. Behind her, Charlie helped her friend stumble in before spinning back to the group.

"Hi, guys," he announced, again, gesturing towards the first girl—who Neil still couldn't place what was so outstanding about. "Meet *Gloria*. And…" he waved towards the girl he'd just helped in, eyes narrowing as he trailed off.

“Tina,” she reminded him.

Charlie snapped his fingers. “Tina, of course. Well, Gloria—and *Tina*—allow me to introduce…” Charlie swept his hand out in a wide arc, almost swiping Tina in the process. “…the pledge class of the Dead Poets Society!”

“Hey,” Meeks repeated, the same daze to his voice as before.

“Hello,” Neil offered, civilly.

“Hi,” Pitts added, nodding at the newcomers.

“Charlie, what the *hell*?” came Cameron’s reply.

“What?” Charlie asked, grinning leeringly as he found his seat. Gloria and Tina followed suit, and the poets shuffled around to make room—Neil ended up with the god in his lap, having removed it from its pedestal so that Tina could sit atop the stepladder. “Neil had a special guest last week. I think it’s only fair that I got to bring a couple of my own.”

Neil curiously flicked his eyes over to Knox, meeting the other boy’s gaze through the haze of heat and smoke. Knox’s face was twisted into a tight-lipped smile, orange sparks dancing across his pupils, eyebrows set in a hard furrow. Gloria had taken a seat beside him, and Charlie beside her; Charlie, naturally, was leaning back against the cave wall, so far back that from his point of view Knox would be entirely obscured by the girl between them. Neil couldn’t help but feel as if that was planned.

“Besides,” Charlie continued, “you all wanted proof that I was serious about letting girls into Welton. And as you can see, I am.” He placed a hand over his heart, puffing out his chest. “I’ve invited these two lovely ladies to sit in on our meeting so that I can *prove* that girls can enjoy the gentlemanly arts, just as much as guys can—and therefore, have as much a place at Welton as us.”

“How *noble*,” Tina said, sighing wistfully at Neil’s side.

“*Isn’t it*?” Neil commented, glaring over at Charlie, who had clapped his hands together—and then proceeded to rub his palms against one another, impatiently.

“Okay, okay, it’s Friday, come on— Are we going to start this meeting or *what*?”

“Yeah,” Gloria piped up, her voice carrying a gentle lilt which Neil found… oddly *familiar*. “If you guys don’t have a meeting, how will we know if we want to join or not?”

“*Join*?” Knox crowed, his voice straining in its pleasantness. Tina might have startled beside Neil, and he wouldn’t be surprised if she had—it was the first time Knox had spoken since the three had filtered into the cave.

Gloria gave him a glance, placing a dainty hand over her flustered smile. “Sorry, I didn’t want to assume— It’s just that Charlie said—”

“It’s just that I said they could,” Charlie cut in, leaning forward so he could address Knox. “If they want to, of course.”

Knox's face contorted for a second, long enough to hit Charlie with a hard stare. Charlie stared back, and the air between them wound tight like a cord.

"And may I ask *why*?"

"Because, Knoxious," Charlie explained, wringing joy from his words like blood from a stone. "I think we could do with more girls around here, don't you?"

Charlie turned sideways, twisting his neck to look at Gloria. She was twisting a lock of brunette hair around her finger, staring curiously between Charlie and Knox—though she quickly became distracted when Charlie *winked* at her, and had to immediately move her hand back to where it was covering her mouth. Her hair fell out of place as she did, one side hanging loose and straight, the other tucked behind her ear.

Knox, meanwhile, was still smiling—now with a strip of teeth showing. "You *really* believe that?"

"Of course I do," Charlie answered, a touch defensive. "And I thought you did too, but I guess you've changed your mind about… *a lot of things*."

"I haven't." Knox's mouth tightened. "I don't think you have, either."

"Oh, but you *have* changed."

“How so?”

Charlie bared his teeth. “You’re now afraid of girls as well as ghosts, it seems.”

Neil tensed up, as if the cord in the air was about to snap. He caught Meek’s eyes go wide, and Cameron muttered something close to—though doubtless just shy of—blasphemy. Even Pitts grimaced. The two girls simply looked perplexed, especially poor Gloria, caught in the crossfire; she seemed almost as if she was about to speak, raising her hand as if to steady Knox’s shoulder, when—

Knox laughed. He *laughed*. Wheezing, breathy, and with just the thinnest lining of delirium. It echoed around the cave, distorting with every reverberation until it was nothing more than another noise lost in the wind outside.

“Alright,” he said, grinning from ear to ear, the corners of his smile so sharp that they cut into where his cheeks bunched up into… *apples*. “Alright, alright— You’re right, Charlie. It’s Friday! Let’s start the meeting.”

Neil looked over to where Charlie was still hovering forward in his seat, appearing just as unstabled by Knox’s outburst as the rest of the poets—if not more so. Of course, he did his best to hide his surprise, but Neil had known him too long for that to work. It was still evident in the slight raise of the eyebrows, the subtle twist of his jaw in its socket, the way he huffed as he threw himself back into a lounge beside Gloria.

“Okay…” Neil began, uncertainty evident in his voice. “Let’s… begin.”

“Great!” Charlie immediately sprang in. “I’ll go first.”

Neil eyed him with as much scrutiny as he could muster. Charlie was normally enthusiastic at meetings, yes, but never *this* enthusiastic. Still, Neil shuffled the god around on his lap to free up a hand, with which he could then pass the poetry collection over to other boy—

He was, however, waved away. “No need,” Charlie informed him. “My first poem I have memorised, and will be an original piece for our lovely Gloria here.”

Gloria turned a shade redder as Charlie faced her full on. Despite themselves, the other poets listened in close, equal parts curious and sceptical—Charlie was both renowned and notorious for his original pieces, and the other boys acted accordingly. Knox, especially, made a great show of leaning in, curling his fingers as he cupped a hand over his ear. Only Tina seemed to shrink away, posture a little stiffer as she moved back towards the cave wall.

“*Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?*” Charlie recited. “*Thou art more lovely, and more temperate.*”

A beat of silence followed Charlie’s… *brilliant* words.

“Huh,” Meeks deadpanned.

“Well, that was…” Cameron started, trailing off as he searched for the vocabulary to describe Charlie’s piece.

“…romantic,” Gloria finished, voice flushing with adoration.

“Did you…” Neil coughed into his fist. “Did you write that yourself, Charlie?”

Charlie straightened himself, face morphing with insult. “Of course I did!”

“Of course he did,” Tina chimed in, pushing herself off of the wall. “He’s brilliant— And he’ll write one for me too, won’t you, Charlie?”

“Naturally,” Charlie crooned, stepping up and over towards her.

As he did, Gloria ducked her head, bunching her hands into a polite pile on her skirt. She removed one briefly, to sweep her hair out of her eyes. Which— It wasn’t anything *terrifically* noteworthy. But as Neil watched, what had struck him about her suddenly concussed him over the head with its plainness; no, nothing she did would’ve been conspicuous on its own. But it wasn’t on its own—

Because beside her was *Knox*.

And as Charlie waltzed across the cave, Knox also settled his hands in his lap. They were fidgety, refusing to stay still, but he managed to keep them contained. That is, until his fringe fell over his face and he had to smoothly disentangle a finger to comb it back behind his ear.

And it hit Neil, then.

Why Gloria seemed so *oddly* familiar.

And once Neil realised, he couldn't stop seeing it—

Gloria hummed softly under her breath as she watched Charlie move away. There was a tenderness in her eyes, gathering about her pupils like the skirt frill of a bed, as she glanced up from where she'd been looking downwards. The same hum seemed to be coming from Knox's lips, the same tenderness gathered around his own pupils. She grinned like him, lop-sided and full-lipped; she laughed like him, all smile lines and lost breath; she spoke like him, with a curling passion threading though her amiable voice.

And it wasn't only mannerisms, either. Gloria seemed so lovely, so easy, with her quiet demeanour—and yet she had been prepared to step in earlier, when Charlie and Knox had been having their… discussion. That, in Neil's opinion, was proof of something solid lying beneath all the charm—another trait she shared with the boy beside her. Gloria, too, seemed like the type of person never to sharpen their words; she spoke gently, genially, and perhaps, if the situation called for it, firmly. But her words would never be barbed, never hold any edge, however loud they were.

And right now, she was staring fondly at Charlie, just as Knox so often did—a wonder in her eyes, a near invisible list to her head, a wistfulness to the rise and fall of her chest—as she watched him complete his second 'original' piece for Tina.

"*All that's best, dark and bright; meet in her aspect, and her eyes*."

"Incredible," the girl sighed, drinking in the words. "You truly have a gift."

"He does, doesn't he?" Knox concurred. Then he continued, in the same honeyed tone, "I mean— It certainly takes *mettle* to pass off someone else's poetry as your own."

Charlie only scoffed. “Jealous of my *bardic capabilities*, Overstreet?” he taunted.

“Doubtful of their existence, more like,” Knox responded. He met Charlie’s gaze, the curve of his mouth hauntingly unwavering. “Come on, Dalton,” he dared. “I think you owe these girls something more than just *recycled* lines.”

Charlie visibly bristled, hefting himself out of his crouch beside Tina, callously dropping the girl’s hand that he’d been holding. “Alright,” he whispered. Then he repeated it, louder. “Alright, Overstreet, you wanted something fresh? *Here*— One Charlie Dalton original, coming right up.”

He stomped over to Gloria, kneeling before her. Next to Neil, Tina fell back in her ‘seat’, rolling her eyes as Charlie took both of her friend’s hands in his. He faced Gloria fully, back turned to everyone else in the cave—except for Knox, who he seemed to be intermittently checking to make sure was still watching.

Charlie clasped their connected hands together, and Neil heard a shuffling of cloth and the clink of glass to his left. Tina was distracting herself from the parade, procuring a bottle that she must’ve stored under her coat. She opened it with a savage twist, before holding it out towards Meeks, on her other side. Meeks declined, and she shrugged, taking a swig herself as Charlie bowed his head and began to speak.

“*Winter is yet to snow a scene*

as brilliant as your eyes,

Spring is yet to bring forth blooms

as brightened as your smile.

Summer is yet to yield fruit softer,

sweeter than your voice,

Autumn is yet to make leaves fall—

As hard, as fast, as I've fallen for you."

Charlie had certainly begun his poem with his eyes beset squarely on Gloria's helplessly scarlet face. But as the lines poured from his mouth like nectar, he allowed his stare to wonder—and so he finished the last lines watching one person over, gauging Knox's reaction with a strange expression on his face. After he was done, his gaze lingered a little too long, as he raised Gloria's interlocked hands in his, pulling them up near his face and pressing a chaste kiss on her ring finger. It was only after that was done did he finally tear himself away, reorientating himself back to the girl in front of him.

Nobody spoke for a few beats, eyes wandering around, the very air itself tensing.

Then Knox stood, briskly.

"Well," he announced, laughter in his voice that didn't reach the rest of his face. "This has been fun. *Real* fun." He nodded at both Gloria and Tina. "It was lovely to meet both of you. I'm terribly sorry that Charlie dragged you both into this." Then he brushed the dirt off of his coat, making for the exit.

He was stopped by Tina's arm, outstretched and offering out the bottle that she'd been nursing throughout Charlie's latest piece. She had a sly smile as, despite Cameron's protests, Knox accepted the drink by its neck—raising it to his lips, taking a hearty swig, wiping his mouth on his sleeve once he was done. Then he returned the bottle, nodded once again in thanks, and then vanished.

Tina took the bottle back and immediately passed it off to Neil. “Go ahead,” she murmured. “Pass it around. Looks like everyone needs it.”

Indeed, the rest of the group left in the cave seemed… *shellshocked*, for lack of a better word. Meeks was muttering something to Pitts, barely audible over the wind outside and the fire inside, but from the look of their faces it was nothing hopeful. Cameron was eying the bottle in Neil’s hand cautiously, raising an eyebrow and motioning towards the cave’s exit when Neil met his gaze. Gloria, too, was staring at the exit —brow furrowed in concern, lips set in a thin line (she even *fretted* like Knox, *God*). That left, Charlie, who was…

…marching over to Neil and snatching the bottle out of his hands, not even waiting for any protest before taking his own swig.

Neil sighed. “What the *hell*, Charlie?”

“*What*?” Charlie glared down, smile weak as water. “I was *thirsty*.”

Neil shook his head. “I wasn’t talking about that. I was referring to Kn —”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about him, Neil,” Charlie interrupted, spilling a few droplets as he shoved the bottle in Pitts’ general direction. Pitts took it, if only to keep it out of Charlie’s hands. “He can take care of himself, can’t he? He’s proven that over, and over, and over again…”

“You should go check on him,” Neil insisted.

Charlie laughed, mirthlessly. “He’ll be *fine* without me,” he said, voice off-kilter. Then he stumbled back over to his seat beside Gloria,

slumping down as he threw an arm over her shoulder. Gloria shot him a wary look—endeared, but wary. She clearly wasn't stupid, and had no doubt gathered by now that something about Charlie wasn't quite *right*. "He's always been fine without me…" he muttered to himself.

"Why are you being… *ridiculous*?" Neil sputtered.

"Why are you being such an *ass*?" Charlie slurred. "And hey— Why don't you check on him, hm? You know how he *loves* when *anyone* other than *me* does *anything*."

Neil pushed himself to his feet, finding the smoky cave a little choking, suddenly. "Maybe I *will*." Then, after nodding his goodbyes just as Knox had, Neil turned on his heel and marched outside—pulling a flashlight from the bag slung over his shoulder, flinching as he stepped out into the biting cold.

He traced his way through the dark forest, following the path he imagined the other boy would've taken. It was halfway along the track that he realised he was still gripping the god of the cave in his other hand, left over from when he'd been holding onto it while Tina occupied its pedestal. He stuffed the idol into his coat, promising to return it to its rightful place in time—its weight bounced in his pocket as Neil made his way through the night, its paint no doubt chipping off against the fabric.

Neil let it, focusing himself back to continuing on with his search.

Which Neil wasn't doing because he felt *obliged* to. Neither was it to spite Charlie and his blunt refusal to go and fix the problem, the problem that *he* had caused in the first place. No, it was because Neil had glimpsed Knox's face when he'd been stomping out of the cave, his footsteps loud enough to wash out the wind outside. Knox had been smiling, as shakily as he'd been the whole time, and his mouth

was scratched where he'd shoved his sleeve against it to wipe the alcohol from his chin. But his *eyes*—his eyes had been ragged, spent, and (for a split second, in a window so short Neil had barely caught it) so, so *pained*. *That* was why Neil sought him out now.

That, and a slightly more… *selfish* reason.

Because Knox didn't only hold a hurt inside him. Neil had observed the way he acted around Charlie, the way he treated him. It had been a stark realisation, dawning over Neil the whole week, just how close the two boys had gotten over the course of the term. Neil knew—or at least, could make a fair assumption—how Charlie felt on the matter; Neil had been his main confidant, as much as he could be. And now, with Charlie choosing to publish the article, bring girls to the meeting, one *particular* girl who looked like…?

But Neil didn't know Knox's side. *That*, Neil knew, was the final key he needed slotted into place. Not just for them—for whatever it was between him and Todd, too.

Knox didn't just hold hurt.

He also held *answers*.

And so, breath quickening and heart racing, Neil pressed on into the night—

With nothing but a *light* and a *god*—

He pressed on.

Chapter End Notes

Ok so I meant for this whole thing to be one chapter but it was lonnngggg so I split it... I'm sorry I SWEAR something will happen next week!!!! thank you so much for reading, kudosing, commenting, just being here :)

and hey look a chapter count 👀 (that I will hopefully stick to)

(also title from Juna!!)

And I Just Might Know You Too

Chapter Summary

Neil speaks with Knox, and some realisations are finally made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the end, it didn't take long to find him.

Even if Neil almost missed him at first, emerging from the woods and beelining straight for the school building. It was only as he was crossing the field did he think to glance backwards—which was all it took to spot a figure shivering on the dock, accosted by the wind. It was nothing more than a silhouette, details disappearing in the overcast night, but the cloaked outline was unmistakeable. Neil pulled his own coat tighter around him as he trekked down the hill, crushing the dewy grass beneath him.

"Knox!" he called, stepping out onto the dock with a wooden creak.

Knox didn't turn, but Neil could see his exhale—a cloud of white, balled-up breath, taken by the wind as soon as it left his lips.

"I was guessing it'd be you," Knox said, still not facing Neil.

Neil stopped just behind him. "Sorry?"

"I mean, I was *hoping* it'd be him." Knox looked over his shoulder, eyes creased. "It… It makes sense it's you, though."

Neil moved a little closer, noticing that Knox wasn't shivering—or, well, he wasn't so much *shivering* as he was *shaking*. He had his hands buried into his pockets and his hood pulled up, but Neil could still tell. The boy was *shaking*, in such a way that Neil couldn't tell if he was about to burst out laughing or burst out crying.

He ended up doing neither, instead swallowing whatever had been building in his throat before managing to choke out his next words. "It's my fault, isn't it?"

Neil pulled his hood up as well, matching the other boy, as he leant in. "What's your fault?" he asked.

Knox turned, watching the waves ripple over the churning lake. "All of… *this*." He gestured vaguely over to where the black, brush-like tendrils of the forest loomed over the hillside. "I told him that Welton should be co-ed. I told him it seems old-fashioned, to have only boys admitted. He… took it to heart, clearly."

Neil scoffed, lightly. "You couldn't have known Charlie'd pull *this*, Knox," he tried. "Hardly *your* fault—"

Knox raised a hand, silencing Neil. "He just needed an excuse. I gave him one. Now he's using it to run off and… be an idiot." Knox laughed, the sound brittle and peppered with the chatter of his teeth. "I'm not— I'm not mad at him, not really. Am I insane? I'm not mad at him. I'm downright *pissed* at everything he does, but…"

"But you can't be," Neil supplied.

Knox turned, smiling. "No. Not at *him*," he commiserated. "Maybe it'd be easier if I could." His expression softened, his eyes losing whatever cold humour they'd held, becoming nothing more than… *tired*, so, so

tired. “You… understand the feeling, don’t you?”

Neil was glad for the wind blowing his hood into his face; it gave him an excuse for why he broke his gaze, rolling his head to the side to glance down at the sprayed wood beneath his feet. The worst part was that Neil *did* understand the feeling. He thought on all his irritations last Sunday, on how Todd had his avoided his attention so thoroughly, on how Todd had shut down any and all possible conversation with him. Could Neil really hold him to fault for that? Especially considering what had happened, not even a couple days prior? Neil shook his head at the very memory—*of course* he couldn’t.

Neil could be furious that it happened as it had—but he’d never blame Todd for it.

“I do,” he muttered, under his breath.

“You do,” Knox echoed. Neil couldn’t see Knox move, preoccupied as he was burning under his many layers, but he could hear him—creaking across the boards, reaching the edge of the dock. From there, Knox hummed over the howling wind, the sound of it cutting in and out as his voice broke.

Neil thought, still drilling his eyes into the shadowy woodened planks, about the *everything* he’d noticed between Knox and Charlie—the countless, constant colloquies that they’d shared; the endless bickering that they would always carry into the classroom with them; the way they had grown closer over their mutual desire to scheme Neil into a relationship. And, now, how they had seemingly fallen apart, not even having spoken for the past week—up until tonight, of course, but, *well*. How that had turned out was obvious in the fact that Neil was standing with Knox out *here*, under the cloud-veiled sky, as the lake beat at the supports below the dock and the wind beat at the boys atop it.

It began with the poem, Neil thought. Knox's poem about 'dancing with autumn leaves'. A love poem, as Charlie had called it. The same Charlie who hadn't been able to shut up about it, afterwards, growing somewhat obsessed with Knox's newfound object of desire; the one that had him sighing out of windows, gazing lovelorn into the middle distance—the one that he had refused to share with Charlie in any capacity, however small. Charlie, not one to be spurned, had then had the bright idea to publish *the article*, daring the school to expel him, which— It had succeeded, in a curious twist of fate, in pulling Knox's attention back onto him. That attention, however, had only been Knox admonishing him for the act, made worse when all the poets agreed the subject matter of said article was… uncharacteristic. And so Charlie had decided to prove them all wrong, clearly, and had gone and brought girls into the equation—one girl in particular, one who had a striking resemblance to—

And then he'd recited another *poem*, the final straw to break the camel's back of Knox's thin-worn patience. It was—for lack of a better word—*poetic*, that it had ended how it began.

And it seemed so simple, putting it all as that.

But there was still that one thing Neil still didn't know, wasn't there? That one single piece, missing from the puzzle that made up the pair and their antics—the one that only Knox knew, that only he could supply. The final nail in the coffin, the key to unravelling the mysteries twisted around the boys like a net—

"Who was it?" Neil asked, abruptly, unable to contain himself any longer.

"Who— Who was *what*?"

"The— The poem, the one you read out for English. About the *leaves*.

It… it was about someone, wasn't it?" Neil looked over towards Knox, but the boy was turned out towards the lake, face hidden by the fabric of his coat. "It was a love poem. About *someone*. Who was it?"

Knox took his hands out of his pockets, wrapped them around himself. Neil was convinced he wouldn't even answer, which—Neil didn't need an answer. He *knew*. But he needed to *hear* it, to know that it to be true. To see the answer scrawled on the stony, smoke-smothered wall, to have it writ out in that oh-so inerasable ink of speech.

"Do you remember what you said?" Knox asked, after several beats of silent deliberation. "Last Friday—*before* the meeting—about the groundskeeper?"

Neil sighed. "Knox, I asked you…"

"I know," Knox interjected. His tone took on a certain quality, almost begging. "Just… humour me, Neil. Please."

Neil, though he shook his head, went along with the other boy's request. "Fine." He scoured his brain for the foggiest of memories from last week; he conjured forth images of uneaten dinners, unfinished history study, and, eventually, the jokes made at the groundskeeper's expense. "I… think so? I said he had bodies buried somewhere, didn't I?"

"Not somewhere," Knox corrected. He pointed out in front of him, and Neil followed his finger out to the dark expanse of water. "In the lake. It's silly, I know, but—"

He turned, pulling his hood back to reveal his face to what little light broke through the clouds above. Neil could see that the colour had drained out of the other boy's face, as he lowered his still trembling

hands—*trembling*, Neil realised. Not from crying, nor laughing, but...

"I've, um, never been good with… *that* sort of subject. Y'know— *Dead things*," Knox admitted, trying and failing to still his finger with his other hand.

Neil paused. "*Dead things?*" he repeated.

"*Dead things*," Knox confirmed, shuddering despite himself as the words left his mouth. "Ever since I was a kid… when I went to my great aunt's funeral, when I was *six*, all I did was cry the whole time. Not because of *her*—no offense, I didn't know her very well—but because it made me sick to the stomach, the idea of…" Knox waved his jittery arm about, trying for a smile. "…*it all*."

"Huh," Neil muttered.

He'd known that Knox was easily daunted when it came to the macabre, that the boy had a tendency to excuse himself whenever they performed dissections in biology. Neil had always thought it strange that Knox had never considered a medical career, despite his connection to *the* Dr. Danburry, but hearing this…

Something cold formed in his stomach as Neil began to connect the dots. "*Huh*. So…"

"Yeah," Knox cut in, managing to keep his voice as near to steady as he could get it. "The whole… '*Welton ghosts*' incident…" The boy let out a jagged breath. "It wasn't… it wasn't ever actually about *ghosts*, really."

The cold something settled in the pit of Neil's gut. "Oh."

"You know what Chet *actually* told me?" Knox asked, to which Neil could only shake his head. "He told me Welton was built on the top of a huge graveyard. Obvious bullshit *now*, but as a kid? *Well*." Knox forced his hands together, trying to allay their shaking. "I mean, you know how it went. Cried all night, couldn't sleep. Wasn't cause of the *ghosts*, I didn't even believe in them—it was the idea of *bodies*, rotting flesh and glassy eyes, decaying below me." A great shiver wracked through Knox's frame, and Neil stepped closer to support him.

"Knox, that's… that's horrible," Neil said.

"I'm better with it, now, though," Knox assured him. "As you can see, the whole thing with the lake didn't affect me too much—if I know it's not real, it's *fine*. Back then I *didn't* know it wasn't real, and I… I had a very vivid imagination." He chuckled, weakly, casting his gaze back over the lake's murky surface. "I also had a roommate I kept awake all night. He asked to switch the next day, and when he was asked *why*, he told everyone that I'd cried all night cause I was scared of ghosts. I didn't expect anyone to want to switch, after that." Knox flicked his eyes over at Neil, the corners of his mouth twitching. "But someone did."

Neil, then, was struck with a memory he'd almost long forgotten. It had been all the way back to his first year, when he'd been as new to Welton as any of the other boys his age—Neil hadn't gotten to know many of his peers yet, was still figuring out his timetable when the commotion broke out. He had been there, crowded in the hall with the rest of the flock, when one little James Deming had begun whining to the teacher about getting no sleep. He'd pointed out what must've been a tiny Knox, still sniffling and red in the face, and loudly blamed him for his lack of rest. Neil had watched on as the boys around him began gossiping, while the teacher had spoken with James about what could be done.

Neil remembered, also, how confused he was when the teacher had asked if anyone was willing to switch—and up had gone the hand right beside Neil, attached to the one boy that he had known since before Welton.

"*Why?*" Neil had hissed at Charlie, eying the younger version of Knox with both sympathy and scrutiny. "*You'll get no sleep if he's crying all the time*."

Charlie had only shrugged. "*My current roommate's* annoying. *I reckon even a crybaby's better than some know-it-all redhead who was born with his foot in his mouth*."

At that, Neil had giggled, and the matter was mostly forgotten as Charlie was called to the front to arrange his bags being switched around—they had been early enough in the term that it wasn't overly difficult, and could be done before the morning was over. It just hadn't been something to stick in Neil's young mind, if he was being truthful. He had wished, a bit later in the day, that Charlie could've instead switched with *his* roommate, another redhead; who was both very intelligent and yet terribly quiet—always mumbling his responses and fiddling with his glasses whenever Neil tried to engage him in conversation.

"*Right*," Neil recalled. "You and Charlie… you were roommates, our first year."

"I didn't know what to make of him, at first," Knox confessed. "Why would someone *volunteer* to be my roommate? It didn't make sense… it kind of frightened me, to be honest. I thought he might've wanted to just make fun of me."

"I mean— He wasn't *without* an ulterior motive," Neil commented. "It had nothing to do with you, though."

“But I thought it *did*,” Knox explained. “So I, uh… I ended up avoiding him the whole day. Then I went to bed early, before he even came in to grab his pyjamas.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t work?” Neil asked, something close to a smile wriggling into his lips.

Knox’s mouth, meanwhile, already had its ends curling upwards. “Of course it didn’t. He’s always been stubborn as a mule— Even back then.”

“So what happened?”

Knox sighed, near fondly. “When he was done brushing his teeth and all that, he walked in and came straight up to my bed,” he recounted. “And he *poked* me. I tried pretending to be asleep, but he kept poking me until I got annoyed and sat up. I asked him what he wanted.” Knox played with his hands before shoving them back into his pockets. “He said he wanted to know if I was going to cry all night, again.”

Neil breathed in sharply through his teeth, but Knox didn’t sound as if he was bothered—in fact, he sounded almost *endeared*.

“I told him I was probably going to, and that I was sorry, and that he could switch back if he wanted. He— He cut me off. Asked me if I was really crying because of the ghosts.”

Neil tilted his head, curious. “And what did you say?”

“I told him the truth,” Knox said, a small quirk to his shoulders. “I told him I didn’t believe in ghosts. That it was the idea of the whole of Welton being built on a graveyard— And you know what he told me?”

Neil tried dredging up his memories of Charlie at the time, to attempt to guess what he could’ve possibly said. Unfortunately, as well as not having changed how stubborn he was, he’d also never fluctuated his levels of unpredictability either—

“I have no clue,” Neil conceded.

The smile that had been threatening to show on Knox’s face won out. “He told me that was bullshit, and whoever told me it was a filthy liar who deserved to be clouted in the face.” Knox laughed, soft and gentle, under his breath.

Neil smiled in kind. “He wasn’t wrong.”

“No,” Knox agreed. “Then, after that, he refused to let go of the fact that I *didn’t* believe in ghosts. He told me that he could convince me, that he knew a ton of ghost stories— But he wouldn’t tell me them if I was gonna cry about it. I insisted that I couldn’t be convinced, and well, you know him—”

“—stubborn as a mule—”

“Exactly. He took it as a challenge, leapt up on my bed as soon as I promised I wasn’t gonna cry on him. Pushed me over on the mattress as he launched into one— It was the one with the swamp, and the scouts who get lost canoeing.”

Neil couldn't help but laugh along. "He told me that one when we first met, too. It's not that scary."

"I told him as much," Knox recollected, teeth flashing in the muffled moonlight. "He got all huffy, asking me to tell him a better one. So I did."

"What was yours about?" Neil queried, genuinely curious—Knox *never* told ghost stories, usually happy to sit on the sidelines whenever they shared them in the cave. Charlie would always hound him for it, saying he was too scared, which… may have been more of an inside joke than Neil realised, now that he was being told what he was by Knox.

"It was the one where the wife follows her husband because she think's he's unfaithful, but finds out he's a killer."

Neil pursed his lips, eyebrows knitting. "But… that's one that *Charlie* always tells."

"I let him have all of mine," Knox said, his voice warming. "I can't tell them half as well as he does. He told me that, right after I'd finished mine—and, to demonstrate his point, launched right into another one. Then he got me to tell another to compare, and then he told another one…"

Neil felt himself grinning along, same as Knox as he stared out over the lake. The waters weren't nearly as choppy as before, having quieted down along with the wind—which was nowhere near as howling as it once was, now only a low whistle sailing above the boy's heads.

"Did you sleep at all that night?"

“Eventually,” Knox mumbled. “At some point we’d both gotten under the covers, each of us whispering into the flashlight that Charlie had snuck over at some point. I started yawning, but he kept going on and on about the little boy who was chained up in his house all the time— I must’ve fallen asleep, because the next thing I remember is that it was morning, and I hadn’t shed a single tear the whole night.”

“Telling you ghost stories worked?” Neil asked.

“Did for the next few nights,” Knox admitted, his cheeks brushed with crimson. “At some point we ran out of stories. So we just talked, instead. About what happened at lunch, which teachers we didn’t like, anything and everything… we’d go until one of us fell asleep. It was almost always me.”

“And you stopped believing that Welton was built on a graveyard?” Neil filled in.

“It took Charlie telling me, again, that it was all bullshit a couple dozen more times,” Knox laughed. “But I eventually caught on that if he was swearing that much at me, it had to be true.”

Neil leant atop one of the raised pillars of wood, resting his chin atop his fist. “I didn’t— I didn’t really know any of that. You guys didn’t hang out in class, not much, and Charlie never mentioned it.”

Knox rolled his shoulders once more. “It wasn’t for anyone else, really,” he supposed. “And we got new roommates the next year anyway. I stopped talking to him for a bit after that. It was only after I started hanging out with you guys that we got close again, and now…” Knox exhaled long and slow, deflating as he glanced back at the dark fringe of the forest poking over the horizon. “Now we’re

here.”

“Now, we’re here,” Neil agreed.

Knox sighed, pulling his hands apart and placing them back into his coat pockets. “I— I didn’t realise what was happening for a while,” he breathed. “Only this year, with him falling back into my life with the whole helping-you-with-Ginny thing, did it hit me. So to answer your question…” He gulped. “…it was about him. It was always about him.” Knox rolled his head to the side, doe eyes crinkling as he stared at Neil. “Same as you, I guess.”

Neil blinked once, twice, heart hammering double-time in his chest. “I — I didn’t write a poem about Charlie.”

“You didn’t write one about Ginny, either,” Knox offered, so casually.

Neil almost bit his tongue in half. “I— I—”

Knox’s face flattened, expectantly, his mouth setting into that same, careful line he wore it in sometimes—not quite a frown, not quite a smile.

Neil avoided his eyes, looking out instead over where the diffused luminescence of the moon was playing over the calmly lapping waves. It was nothing more than a sheet of immaterial white, laid over the ripples of water, barely peeking through the swirling, shadowy clouds above.

“It wasn’t—” he sputtered. “I— I didn’t *know* it was a love poem.”

“And now…?” Knox posited, no pressure in his voice—only an invitation.

“Now?” Neil swallowed. “Now… I don’t *know*.”

“You do.”

Neil bit so hard into the flesh of his cheek he tasted blood.

“I do.”

Neil could feel Knox’s stare, pressing and yet so *infinitely* patient.

Because Neil couldn’t deny it, not now. Not after his revelation earlier in the week, seeing what Charlie and Knox had, how it reflected his own connection to Todd. Neil had held out hope that he was misinterpreting it all, but Knox had calmly torn that hope to shreds. The shard had been retrieved from within Neil’s heart, and it laid bloodied on the table before him.

Neil *knew*.

Neil *had* known.

He had known for a while; far before he’d pulled Todd out of the cave, had almost made the mistake of pressing his chewed lips to Neil’s own under the waxing moon. It could’ve been when Neil had sat beside

him in the meeting, shimmied so close to him in the cave that their legs had been brushing all night. It could've been when Neil had first invited Todd to that meeting, standing within the haloing glow of the streetlamp outside the Danburry residence. It could've been before that, when Todd had launched the accursed desk set into the void of the river, a wild sparkle to his face that Neil had wished he could see more of. It could've been any number of the times he and Todd had talked after rehearsals, with the other boy's face flushed from the cold as he was pulled into the theatre lobby—despite his mumbled protests. It could've been when he caught Todd's gaze as he was performing his soliloquy at the auditions for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that single face in the crowd enrapturing him more than it should've.

But Neil knew it wasn't any of those times.

Neil knew it was that first night, when he'd first knocked upon the Danburry's door, only to be answered by a boy whose identity he mistook. When he'd watched that same boy for the rest of the evening, so determined to find that single way past all of his defences—some way to peek through the curtains, to glimpse the person lying behind the hushed voice, the reluctant laugh, the shy smile. When he'd chased the boy down, watched by the millions of stars overhead, notebook clutched in his hand.

But knowing something and speaking it aloud were two different things. To speak it aloud would make it solid, tangible, *real*—it was a cliff that, once it was leapt off of, could not be climbed back onto.

So Neil hadn't spoken it aloud; he'd buried it, entombed it so deep into his chest that it ached whenever his heart deigned to beat. He had shrouded it all, refusing to believe the truth before his eyes, lost sight of it chasing the idea of something easier—something he was allowed to feel, to do; something less fraught with hardship and heartache.

And so Neil had teetered at the cliff's edge—and had continued to do

so, for far too long.

But now—

Now, he knew.

Now, it was finally time for him to *leap*.

“I’m in love with him.”

He wheeled back to Knox, who only nodded. Neil, suddenly frantic, raised his hands and yanked his hood back, shaking out his mussed hair as he stared up at the overcast sky.

“Oh, God, I’m in *love* with him—” Neil almost doubled over as the words left his lips, the breath punched out of his lungs. It could’ve been his sudden elation at finally confessing, or it could’ve been the dawning horror of his situation. In either case, he suddenly felt weak at the knees, close to collapsing. “Oh, God,” he cursed again, looking back down at Knox. “And you’re—”

“In love with Charlie,” Knox finished, laughing a little as he spoke.

“*God*,” Neil repeated, giddily, head spinning. He forced his lungs to function once more, literally beating at his ribs with his fist. “How—How long have you—?”

“Since that first night,” Knox answered, ducking his head slightly. “When it was just us, under the covers, and I was forgetting

everything I'd been afraid of." He leant against his own pillar of wood, scratching idly at its side. "I didn't understand it at the time, but looking back… it's *painfully* obvious."

Neil raked his hand through his hair, finding it wet and tangled. He became suddenly aware of how much he was *sweating* beneath his coat and sweater, pulling out his collar in an attempt to fan away some of the gathered heat.

"What about you?" Knox asked.

Neil wiped his hand on the side of pants. "A— A long time," he replied, a bit voiceless. "As long as I've— As long as I've known him, I think."

Knox nodded, unfazed. He allowed a moment of silence, letting Neil finally catch his breath and cool himself down. Knox spent the time gazing out towards the distant shore, as above them the moon began to break through the clouds. Neil couldn't tell, but it looked as it were full.

"You know," Knox began, speaking down towards the wood he was picking at. "You— You may not be as *hopeless*, as I am."

Neil studied the boy in front of him carefully, his heart still jackrabbiting under his coat. "What do you mean by that?"

"Todd, he—" Knox stopped, wet his lips, and then continued. "He… cares for you. A lot."

"Not enough to speak with me," Neil mumbled, ruefully. He knew,

however, that the words were unfair as soon as they'd left his lips.

Knox, apparently, knew Neil well enough to see through him just as well. "Give him some time," he advised. "I don't know what happened last week, but— But I think you need to talk to him. When you're ready."

"I tried," Neil protested, feebly. "He doesn't want to speak with me. I understand, but…"

Knox clicked his tongue, shaking his head as he flicked splinters from beneath his fingernails. "He doesn't want to speak with you because he doesn't know what you're gonna tell him."

"And what am I gonna tell him?"

Knox looked up at that. "What you just told me," he responded, simply, easily.

Neil balked. "I couldn't— I *shouldn't*—" He peered back out over the inky waters, now catching the shoddy reflection of the thinning cloud cover—and the glowing pulse just beyond it. It was perfectly serene, now; the wind had died, the waves had subsided. "I— I need more time."

Knox nodded. "I get it. Just… just don't wait too long," he warned. "It… *hurts*, you know. Thinking that the person who you love doesn't love you back." Knox clenched a fist over his chest, his teeth gritting in what little light was breaking through to the scene below.

"Are you…" Neil swallowed again, throat dry. "Are you ever going to

tell Charlie?"

Knox looked out over the lake, eyes narrowing. "I think he's made it pretty clear where he stands on that," he spat, not scornful—only resigned. "What we have is… *different* to what you have, Neil."

"How so?" Neil inquired.

Knox rested both his arms on the pillar he'd been whittling away at, lacing his fingers together. "Because you can't ignore it," Knox sighed. "You're always chasing down Todd, no matter where he goes, no matter what gets in your way."

Neil looked away, heat creeping up his face. "Was I— Was I really that obvious?"

"Don't worry," Knox said. "You weren't. Even I wasn't certain about it, seeing how you acted around Ginny."

Neil felt his throat run dry. *Ginny*. How had he acted around Ginny?

"You're different to me, Neil," Knox continued, staring wistfully out over the water. "I couldn't have done what you did. If *I'd* had a perfectly lovely, respectable girl simply fall into my life, like you had —I would've taken it, tricked myself into thinking I wanted it. *Pushed* myself to want it, even if it killed me." He unlaced his fingers, laced them again, as a heavy weight began to pull Neil's coat down. "It would've been the easy way out. There's no shame in taking it— Lots of people like us do. It wouldn't be the truth, but the truth is… *difficult*."

The god grew heavier in the fabric of his pocket, and a memory came to Neil; of laughing with Ginny in the prop room, as he pulled the shade from a dusty lamp to reveal the figure beneath. They had been pointing out more and more ridiculous items the entire time, but this one took the proverbial cake; the stem for the bulb sticking through where its brain should be, the crooked lean that the figure had been shaped into, the way the peeling of the paint had ruined its expression in the funniest way imaginable—it had been Ginny who suggested he should take it back to show his friends, as they both wiped tears from their eyes.

"That's why I know it'll be different for you," Knox added, as Neil shook away his thoughts.

"I don't believe that, Knox," he said. "You should tell him, same as I should tell Todd. If you've seen—"

"Please, Neil," Knox broke in, pleadingly. "It's— It's nothing I haven't thought of before, okay? Just… drop it." He waved his hand, dismissive. "You tell Todd, and I'll be happy for you. That can be enough for me."

Neil couldn't drop it. He thought on Charlie's insistence that Knox tell him about his poem, his *crush*. How it had soured him to the point of acting out—how had Adam put it? *Guys will do this sort of huge, big act in the interest of getting a girl*. And there was Gloria's appearance, her mannerisms, how Charlie had acted reading out his original poem for her—

Neil was ready to debate the point further, but Knox didn't give him the chance. The other boy straightened himself before Neil could get his words out, placing his hood back up as he glanced back towards the hill.

“We best get in for the night,” he muttered, walking back towards the dock. As he did, he placed a hand on Neil’s shoulder. “Remember what I said, alright? *Tell* him.”

Neil nodded, biting back his retort of *you tell him too*. Instead, he answered simply. “Okay. And— And thanks, Knox.”

Knox smiled. “I should be thanking you, all things considered, but… it’s alright. Anytime, okay? It’s… nice, to not be alone in this.”

“Anytime,” Neil promised.

Knox seemed happy with that, and began making his way up the hillside. Neil followed in silence, nothing but a low breeze trailing over the waters behind them filling the dead of the night; autumn-crisped leaves turned to muck beneath their feet as they trod their way past the forest, up around and back to the door they would sneak in and out of before and following every meeting. Neil pulled the door open as carefully as he could, not wanting it to creak on its ancient hinges.

Knox shuffled in, having meticulously dried his shoes as best as he could on the stone step before entering. It was something the poets had learned to do after Pitts had been questioned about the sodden prints leading through the hallway to his door, one Saturday morning. He’d told Dr. Hager he’d only been out for an early run, which worked well enough *once*—but, as Meeks had pointed out, would likely become suspicious if Pitt’s runs began to encompass four other sets of prints.

The thought of the other poets drew Neil’s attention back to the forest, and he wondered how the rest of the society were faring at the moment. Were they still beyond the black tree line, sharing sips from Tina’s contraband while Charlie doted on Gloria? Gloria with her

straight, brunette hair, feathery voice, gentle demeanour—

Or had they already turned in, Charlie having left to escort the girls back to their Henley dorms? Were they already sleeping up in their rooms—or perhaps, lying awake, worrying about where Neil and Knox had gone? Did any of them think it strange how Charlie had been acting, how he brought in a girl which looked and acted so alike to another of their friends? Did they find Knox's behaviour strange? *Neil's*?

Did they *know*?

Neil turned his eyes upwards, to the still clouded-over sky. He lingered just before the doorway, the heavy wood digging into his hand as he watched where the moon was hiding. Its brightness made the spot obvious, and yet it wasn't brilliant enough to burst through the veil that had been drawn over the night. It was then that the reality of everything washed over him, all of the world-ending revelations of his short conversation with Knox.

It was an earth-shattering admission he'd made. And yet it had been so mundane, and nothing he said seemed to come to the shock of either boys.

It was frightening for the words to be out there, for the truth to be so blatantly exposed—Neil's heart torn out, stitched to the outside of his chest. But it was also equally relieving, exhilarating, electrifying in the way it made Neil's blood pump and his stomach itch.

It was a precipice that had been vaulted, a threshold that had been crossed, a peak that had finally been summited.

And that was *terrifying*.

But Neil knew he wouldn't take it back. He didn't *want* to take it back. He was glad for it to be out there, solid, tangible, real.

He smiled, up at where the cloud cover was the most radiant—ripples of moonlight beaming at the seam between the sky and the earth, promising the complete circle of light was just within reach. If Neil squinted, he could imagine ribbons of it, sneaking through gaps and catching in a brook running through the woods.

And Neil knew what he wanted, as he slipped inside and carefully closed the door behind him—tiptoeing back to his room, sinking himself down into his mattress before proceeding to toss and turn. He couldn't sleep. He knew what he wanted, finally.

It was simple, in the end. He'd missed it, somewhere, saw the forest for the trees a few too many times—but he was here now; he'd made it.

It was simple.

Because what Neil wanted was *Todd*.

And that was it.

Chapter End Notes

> We finally got there!!!!!!!!!! Now we just have to see what Neil does with it...
>
> Also funny how writing chapter one I thought "oh, I know, I'll put in a little reference to that ghost anderperry fic that made me cry :) that'll be fun :)" and now I'm googling the symptoms of necrophobia 😭

title is again from 'juna'. sorry for making you wait with this chapter, but I was so so busy last week. Good news is that the next few weeks are NOT looking busy, and so hopefully I can get some serious writing done :) thanks as always!

But I'd Rather Be Alone Than A Stranger

Chapter Summary

> Neil has a long overdue conversation with someone. Not the someone you'd expect, though.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil had thought that the world would end, now that he'd realised what he had. That everything would somehow change, the frame of the picture always off-skewed, the colour of the film of his life forever tinted a different shade.

Yet with the passing days, the feeling had fossilised—some things were different, yes, the most notable being that Neil now shared most of his time with *Knox* out of all of the poets.

But, surprisingly, most was the same.

And so Neil found himself—once again—tapping his fingers on the handlebars as he rolled down Welton hill, the breeze whistling in his ears as he pedalled his way past the trees lining the pavement. They were all but emptied of leaves, now, naked branches swaying gently in the low, brisk wind. Overhead the sky was as grey and clouded over as it always was these days, the promise of winter barely a few early sunsets away. Neil took a familiar couple turns, navigating as easily as he navigated his own dorm, until he found himself—*once again*—outside of the Everett Theatre, for yet another rehearsal. He parked his bike before hurrying in through the doors, the sounds of another practice performance already echoing from within.

Neil had only made it past the lobby before he stopped, looking onto the bright-lit stage from behind the theatre's seating. Up in the spotlight was a scene Neil knew all too well—not like there was a

scene in the play he *didn't* know well, but this one was quite literally the *very first*. Act one, scene one; responsible for laying the foundation of the four lovers and their quarrels, both of which would continue to develop throughout the rest of the narrative. The segment taking place onstage at the moment was between Oliver, playing Lysander, and… *Ginny*, playing Hermia.

It wasn't with him now, but the memory of the god—the one now stowed under Neil's bed, waiting for its return to its pedestal—still weighed heavily in his pocket, as did the memory of its discovery. Neil swallowed as he watched the scene unfold before him, playing to a tattoo he had memorised.

"A good persuasion," Oliver recited. "Therefore hear me, Hermia—"

"Wait, please," the stage director called, pinching the bridge of her nose. "*Excitement*. I don't hear any *excitement*…"

As Oliver was further instructed, Ginny's gaze wandered from her place in the painted scenery. She spotted Neil, still standing just after the entrance, and he tried offering her a tenuous smile. She visibly tensed, turning away stiffly as she went to take Oliver's hand. Neil felt the invisible weight in his pocket double, sinking the fabric and pulling down the seams of his blazer until they cut into his skin. He hurried towards his place backstage, still following the rest of the scene in his mind.

Neil had the entire script jotted down in his mind, naturally. He could mutter the lines under his breath, lyrics to a song spoken in perfect rhythm; it was a rhythm Neil was overly familiar with, one he knew just as well as he knew his own heartbeat—if not *more* so.

Needless to say, he knew how the scene progressed. Hermia and Lysander, after Theseus decreed that Hermia must marry Demetrius,

plan on fleeing Athens into the woods. It was romantic, Neil thought, how hard they fought to be together, despite the express wishes of both Hermia's father and the king of Athens himself. Of course, Hermia tells Helena about her schemes, and Helena then tells Demetrius in an attempt to win him over. It's the setup for how the four lovers end up in the woods, which ultimately leads into them becoming ravelled up in the tricks of the fairies.

Neil sighed as he crept backstage, slumping his bag onto the ground. Adam looked up from where he'd been sitting against some unfinished backdrop, the colour of the half-painted wood dismal in the slightly-less-low lighting. (The improvement in brightness was, of course, due to Ginny's injury however long ago. It wasn't terrifically better, but it had so far prevented any more of the actors spraining their ankles, so.)

"Ah, Neil!" Adam called, speaking in a loud whisper. "Finally showing up, are you?"

"Oh, please," Neil insisted, showing off his borrowed wristwatch. "I'm not *that* late."

Adam held his hand out, palm facing down, teetering with his wrist. "They *did* start without you."

"Yes, well. They don't need to direct me around that much, do they?" Neil pointed out, moving towards the part of the wing where he had a view onto the stage proper. He took a seat there, peeking out onto the players, Ginny and Oliver still running through their promises to meet in the forest.

Adam snickered somewhere behind him. "They really don't. You could probably direct them around yourself."

Neil only hummed in response. He was busy watching as Oliver took Ginny's hands in his, Lysander speaking vows to his lover, her speaking them in turn. And like clockwork, in entered Mary, playing Helena. *Poor Helena*, Neil thought, watching as she lamented to the pair about Demetrius scorning her. It was delicate, the way Mary played her character; a reflection of the girl herself, sometimes. The boy playing Demetrius, on the other hand—David, he was called, though Neil rarely talked to him—was more boisterous, near callous at moments. It made Helena all the more sympathetic, in Neil's eyes.

Of course, all of those waters would be muddied when the fairies incidentally involved themselves—one fairy in particular, one mischievous sprite with a propensity for trickery and a love-afflicting flower on his fingertips. Later, Neil knew, when all four lovers were in the woods, Puck would tiptoe into their scenes, apply love-in-idleness upon their eyelids, and then tiptoe out. Lysander would wake and, by happenstance, spot Helena first—limping strangely to his feet as the spell took effect, swelling his voice as he fell head-over-heels in love… with the *wrong* person.

Lysander would pursue Helena, chasing her off deeper into the woods. That would be where both Hermia and Demetrius would discover them, to witness their perfectly sorted love life's each respectively ruined. Neil had seen it happen over and over—would likely see it happen again, this very rehearsal. He stared out onto the stage once more, catching the way Hermia's face lit up when she spoke of her eloping with Lysander. Ginny played her character cleverly; in this scene, she stuffed full her voice with hope, warm and bright, young love at its most idyllic.

It made the moment later, when Hermia would discover Lysander's sudden switch of suitorship, all the more abrasive. Hermia, of course, would appear insulted—mocked, indignant, ireful—as she realised that the man she adored had fallen in love with someone else, someone *wrong*. But Ginny played the character deeper than that, too. Hermia would also be inwardly sorrowful, her heartbreak pouring out in the barbed words she would threaten Helena with. She wouldn't do it out of spite, out of malevolence; it would be out of *desperation* that she treated her friend such.

Falling in love with the wrong person.

Neil fiddled with the lining of his pockets as the three actors onstage each took their exit, one-by-one—fortunately for Neil, towards the opposite wing. What did it mean to fall in love with the *wrong* person? Was it something that could only come about through interference, like Puck with his magical charms? Or could it be something more… circumstantial? Neil recalled how Hermia's father barred her, in the very first scene of the play, from marrying Lysander—forcing her to be with Demetrius, instead. In that case, Lysander had been the *wrong* person for Hermia. And yet by the end of the play the pair would be married, the universe allowing the couple to be so.

Was it the love they shared that made it so? If so, what separated that love from the love brought about by the fairies and their misplaced enchantments?

Also at the end of the play, everything was supposed to be returned as it should be. The spells of the night were lifted, and all was made right again—Hermia with Lysander, and Helena with Demetrius. Lysander even receives the blessing of Theseus, overruling Hermia's father's wishes, proving that the love once forbidden had been *correct* all along. Every one of the lovers think their time in the woods, when everything had been *wrong*, had only ever been a dream.

But what if they had never woken up? What if the affects of the love-in-idleness *couldn't* be undone, if morning broke over Athens and Lysander remained besotted with the wrong person?

Could all still be mended then?

The invisible pulse of the play hung in the air, audible only to Neil's

ears. The silence was broken as the mechanicals piled into the spotlight, the next scene beginning. Neil stayed at the threshold of the wings only a little longer.

Life wasn't a play, and whatever he was in was no dream. So maybe, just maybe—

That meant that there was still hope.

He would still be able to fix things.

And glaring out, across the stage, towards the opposite wing of the theatre—

He had an idea of where to start.

Neil didn't get the chance until rehearsals had ended, pushing his way out into the lobby—a pang of nostalgia finding its way to his temples, as he searched around the room. Neil had had to stuff his script into his satchel in a rush, mumble an undoubtably incoherent goodbye to both Adam and Mary, and then basically bolt out from backstage in order to catch up with the head of chestnut hair he'd spied disappearing as soon as ol' one-and-two's final remarks were concluded. He spotted the same head of hair, now, already almost at the theatre's open double doors, making determinedly for the exit.

"Ginny! Wait!" Neil called.

Ginny stopped—whether out of surprise or curiosity, Neil couldn't tell—though in either case, it gave him the window necessary to close the gap between them. He was stood behind her when Ginny turned, though not fully; it was only enough for her to peer over her shoulder, the wool of her winter coat blocking her mouth from view as she muttered into it.

"Oh," she began, tone clipped, yet again. "Neil. Did you need something?" She couldn't even meet his eyes, instead becoming suddenly fascinated with the tiling of the lobby floor.

Neil recalled a time when this had been a place of gathering, for them. When he, Ginny, and the rest of their friends would linger about in the space long after rehearsals had finished up, joking and gossiping and whiling away the time until they were inevitably kicked out onto the curb by the theatre staff. It hadn't been so long ago, and yet it all had changed so fast; Ginny, like she was attempting to do so currently, had begun to make a habit of leaving rehearsals as early as humanly possible. Meanwhile, as the end of term approached, schoolwork was picking up for all of them—which meant Neil, Adam, and Mary were all too aware of the lobby clock ticking away to enjoy themselves. And Todd—

Well, Todd had stopped showing up altogether.

Neil took a deep breath in.

"I have… I have something I need to tell you."

Ginny bristled, head flinching backwards as if slapped. Neil could see her mouth contort unpleasantly, her eyelids flutter, her resolve harden. "Neil, I—" She cut herself off, shaking her head. "I— I have to go—"

“Please, Ginny,” Neil begged. He couldn’t see her eyes, now, but he knew what they looked like—*had* looked like, for too long now. Wide irises of chocolate brown, dull where the spark they’d once held had been smothered underfoot. Neil’s throat constricted, thinking—no, *knowing*—that that had been something *he’d* caused, something *he’d* been responsible for. “It’s— It’s important.”

Ginny seemed rooted to the spot, chewing her lip as she glanced cautiously between Neil and the doors of the theatre. The lobby was practically empty, only a few of their fellow actors beginning to filter out of the space behind them—so early was it that Ginny had planned to escape. But what Neil had to say couldn’t wait, not any longer.

“Please,” Neil said, again.

Ginny forced her gaze back forwards, wrapping her arms around herself, tucking her chin into her chest. “Fine,” she uttered, voice as cold as the air pushing in through the open doors. “What did you want?”

Neil fiddled with the strap of his bag, pulling it tight where it slung over his shoulder, eying the—few and far between, yes, but—not *insignificant* amount of people beginning to enter the space, their ears dangerously open, ready to catch any stray snatches of conversation floating their way.

“Can we— Can we do this somewhere more… *private*, actually?”

Ginny’s fingers turned white where they gripped onto her coat as she nodded, curtly. “Alright,” was all she said before continuing her march towards the exit of the theatre, barely slowing as she stepped onto the pavement outside. Neil, caught off guard, hadn’t moved,

which Ginny observed with a disinterested flick of her head. “Well?” she called back, dryly. “Let’s get this over with.”

Neil jogged after her, catching her as she turned onto the pathway beside the street. The day had bled away during their time in the theatre, dimming even farther from how overcast and dreary it had been earlier. Now it was drearier still, and colder too—the chill immediately began pouring into Neil’s bones, cutting through his blazer as if it were a ghost. He gritted his teeth as his body fought shivers, mustering his courage.

“Can we walk?” he asked, fetching his bike and wheeling it up beside him. He gestured towards the street he knew led, eventually, to the Danburry’s residence, having watched Ginny—along with Todd, of course—disappear down it so often, back in that before when relations were still amicable between all of them. Recently, of course, Ginny had been walking home alone, claiming Todd simply wasn’t a fan of the colder weather—which both Adam and Mary had bought.

Neil hadn’t. He knew that it was no coincidence that the first rehearsal Todd missed had been directly following *that* fateful society meeting.

“Alright,” Ginny sighed again, eyes set ahead as she began clacking her way down the street. She didn’t walk so fast that Neil couldn’t keep up, pulling along his bicycle by its creaking frame—but she did walk fast enough that Neil couldn’t catch her face as she did, intent on keeping Neil out of her field of view. It was how they continued on for *streets*, a heavy silence hanging between them; Neil, not yet having the pluck to speak out, and Ginny, not yet having the patience to listen to him. Despite how sad it made him, Neil found he couldn’t blame her.

Same as he couldn’t blame Todd, Neil couldn’t blame Ginny.

And same as he needed to mend things with Todd, Neil needed to

mend things with Ginny. But that—

That meant he needed to stop dancing around the point.

“I’m not in love with you.”

Ginny braked, hard, and Neil almost collided with her back. He had hoped he could be gentle, not cause any undue harm in the process—he’d realised, though, that drawing it out would only serve to make it a more miserable experience for both parties involved. Better to have it over and done with quickly, Neil had decided.

Ginny still hadn’t turned, her figure almost a statue, standing stiffly in the middle of the path. They had reached the quieter, residential streets now, and were all but alone in the world; not many people were about at this time of day, and less were about in this sort of weather. So it was only them in the frigid, grey sanctuary of the street, the ashen yawn of the cloudy sky above them.

“I’m sorry,” Neil continued. “I— I tried, I think. I acted as if I *was*, convinced myself that I *was*, but… I wasn’t. I’m sorry.”

Ginny had her hands hidden from Neil, placed together in front of her, grip glued onto the strap of her own satchel. That didn’t stop Neil from thinking—no, *knowing*—that her fingers were shaking, possibly even more violently than how her shoulders now trembled under her coat. Neil knew it wasn’t from the cold, either.

When Ginny finally spoke, her voice was quivering. It was obvious, however, how much effort, how much *strength*, was being channelled into it—all in an effort to keep it from breaking entirely, splintering to pieces in the air.

“I know,” she said, quietly. “I… I know.”

“Listen, Ginny,” Neil began, moving to reach out and comfort the girl. He thought better of it, however, and so his hand only awkwardly hovered before her shoulder as she continued.

“I know, Neil. I know.” Her tone grew flatter with every passing word, almost bitter by the time she reached the end of the sentence. “You… you had me fooled, for a little bit. Though maybe… maybe I made it all up.”

“No, Ginny, you *didn’t*.” Neil retracted his hand, moving it back to his bike—which he steered towards the fence of the park they’d ended up beside, resting it against the wrought-iron bars. He booted the kickstand until its rusted joints gave way, before turning back. “*I* made the mistake of thinking it, of acting it out. It’s not your fault.”

Ginny spun around at that, and Neil saw that there were tears welling up in her eyes, threatening to spill over her lashes. Though even as she blinked them away, and her lips began to tremble along with her shoulders, Ginny managed to twist her mouth into something defiant. “Well, then I’m sorry *too*,” she spat. “If it was such a *mistake*.”

Neil grimaced, inhaling sharply through his teeth. “Ginny, that’s not what I meant—”

Ginny scoffed, weakly, pawing at her eyes. “What *did* you mean, then?” she demanded.

Neil’s tongue knotted itself in his mouth, and he choked on his own voice as it coiled up in his throat. This was it— *This* was the moment.

This was the decision he'd mulled over for the previous several nights, metronoming back and forth between whether he should commit to it or not—systematically cutting down his options until he was forced to admit that *this* was the only path forward. He had even gone as far as to rehearse the lines he'd speak, writing himself his very own script within the pages of his English notebook. Afterwards, he had underlined the pencilled words, a vow to himself that he would speak them aloud when the time came.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Ginny; he trusted her enough to be sure she wouldn't *ruin* him. To be sure that no matter how she reacted, how she saw him at the end of the day, she would be able to keep her opinion private—for the sake of their friendship, whether it was to continue on or die there, in that moment, December on the horizon and the play's first performance set for not long after. Neil knew the risk he was taking, knew that Ginny may never look at him the same way, may never wish to speak with him again. But he knew, also, that she wouldn't use it against him. He was *certain* of that—and that gave him just the smallest reassurance.

Besides—she, of all people, had a right to know; considering how poorly Neil had treated her.

And yet.

Despite all *that*—

Neil was still terrified. Terrified to admit it, openly, to another person—a person who wasn't Knox, who wasn't like *him*, who didn't stand to lose what *he* stood to lose.

His voice squeaked as he started to speak, sparing with his volume, barely audible over the trace of wind above them.

“Do you—” he sputtered out. “Do you know how I *felt*, that first night? When I had dinner over at your house?”

Ginny fidgeted in her stance, placing her weight onto one foot, then the other. “N-No.”

“When I was stuck on the couch, listening to you and Todd study together— Watching you smiling at each the whole time? Laughing at each other’s jokes? Whispering things between yourselves, like the rest of the world didn’t exist?”

“When you thought we were dating,” Ginny cut in, unimpressed.

Neil nodded, pushing down his embarrassment. “Yes, exactly. Do you know how I *felt*?”

Ginny let out a sigh, delicate—yet impatient. “I already said, Neil, I *don’t*.”

“I felt… *jealous*.”

Ginny paused in her fidgeting, long enough to look Neil up and down —her eyes still glistening, yet now too busy studying the boy before her to shed any fresh tears.

“Jealous…?” Ginny repeated, confused.

“Jealous,” Neil confirmed, nearly laughing at the memory. How he’d been so blind to it, then, he’ll never truly know—the feeling had writhed in his stomach something awful, just waiting to be named, refusing to go unfelt. “I was so, terribly, horribly jealous. It made me feel *sick*.”

Ginny met Neil’s gaze, deliberate and slow. Neil felt like crumbling, turning to dust and scattering to the wind, as Ginny swallowed and asked the question—not *a* question. *The* question.

“Who… who were you jealous of?”

Neil tore his eyes away, casting them instead towards the deadened trees which inhabited the once-green park beside them. Naked branches, emptied of leaves, threaded through the low mist of the cloudy gloam as he shuddered against the late-autumn air.

“That’s— That’s where I made the mistake, isn’t it?” Neil near *whispered*, too afraid that if he gave his voice any weight, whatever fragile peace existed in the moment would shatter. “I… I thought I was jealous of him.” Neil dropped his focus down to the pavement he was standing atop, cracked and grey as everything around them. “…I was wrong.”

“You were…” Ginny trailed off, her hesitation as obvious as any words could’ve been.

“I didn’t know I was, at first,” Neil confessed. “My friends seemed convinced that I was jealous of *Todd*, in love with *you*. And I— I went with that. I went with that, but… but it wasn’t the truth.” Neil thought back on what Knox had told him at the dock. “It was easier, but it wasn’t the truth. The truth was… *is*… difficult.”

Neil couldn't look up at Ginny, eyes still locked onto the earth below his feet. It was all he could do to ground himself, to keep himself from tipping over and spilling his skull on the pavement. He couldn't look up—but neither could he stop himself from speaking.

"I— I did genuinely enjoy all the time we spent together, you know," he said. "I didn't think I could've enjoyed rehearsals more, but with you there…? And running lines at your house, for however long that went well…?" Neil chuckled, soft and despondent. "I just… I just wanted to thank you. For putting up with me. And I wanted to apologise, of course— If I could've realised sooner, maybe we wouldn't be in this mess. But we are, and… and it's my fault. I'm sorry."

Neil was met with silence. Even the wind died above them, like a breath stopped halfway up the throat. He kept himself looking down until he couldn't any longer, risking a glance up at Ginny's face. Expecting what, he didn't know—something shocked, perhaps, something aghast with horror. A face gnarled with revulsion. But when he looked, he saw only that Ginny was crying, again, tracts of tears shining on her cheeks. Though this time, Neil realised, she wasn't crying for herself.

She was crying for *him*.

"Oh, Neil—" Ginny said, only able to get those two words out before she stepped forwards and tackled him into a fierce hug—her bag dropped at her feet in the movement, lost and forgotten beneath her as she pulled Neil in so tightly that the breath he'd been holding was knocked loose. After a beat of shock, Neil *sunk* into the embrace, vaguely aware that tears were beginning to prick in his own eyes. His chest unknotted as Ginny's arms wrapped around him, warmth spreading through his entire body.

When they pulled apart, Ginny didn't let him go far—she kept her hands anchored on Neil's shoulders, staring up at him with pupils

swimming and sympathetic. “God, Neil,” she choked out. “I’m so sorry — A-All this time, I was so *mad* at you, and I didn’t even know—”

Neil let out a small, breathless laugh. “You shouldn’t be *sorry*, Ginny —”

Ginny shook her head again, more adamant than she had before. “No, no, I should. I should have *known*. With how you were, and how Todd is—” She cut herself off, pressing her lips firm together.

“What— What do you mean, ‘how Todd is’?”

Ginny began chewing on her lips once more, eyes moving to the pair’s right. “Oh. *Oh*. We— We really *do* need to talk,” she muttered, as the beating of Neil’s heart filled his ears. She checked both ways on the street, then once up at the darkling sky. “Come on,” she said, dragging Neil into the adjacent park. “There’s… there’s some things that need explaining, I think.”

A short walk into the park, past the same wrought-iron fence that Neil left his bike leaning up against, he and Ginny found a pair of swings to settle down on. Other than them, the scenery may as well have been abandoned—it was only the two of them in the odd twilight time they had found themselves in, uncoloured under the cover of cloud.

The chains of the swings were frozen as Neil held them loosely in his hands, the board he rested upon soaked by the mist. But Neil found he didn’t mind; he was too preoccupied filling Ginny in with everything that had happened thus far, from his odd behaviour that very first dinner to hounding her down after rehearsals. It was daunting, at first, to be so open about it, but Neil found it became easier the longer he spoke. It helped that Ginny, of all people, deserved the full

elaboration, having been squeezed between the two main players of the farce for its entire length.

As the metal links in his fists clinked softly in their hinges, Neil slowly felt the tension that had built in his posture finally bleed away—for how long it had existed there, he had no idea. It could've been when they'd stepped out the theatre lobby that afternoon, or when Neil had finally realised his feelings out on the dock—

Some part of it may have existed within Neil for his entire life, a glacial wall built into the core of his very being—one that was only now just beginning to melt, water trickling through Neil's inhibitions, loosening his tongue. It felt… *nice*, he decided. Like finally having room to stretch his legs, after spending his entire life cramped into an oversmall box.

"So, Knox is the only person to know about your… *development*?" Ginny asked.

"Yep," Neil answered. "Besides you, now."

Ginny rocked gently in her seat, reaching out to place a tender hand atop Neil's sleeve. "I'm glad— I'm glad you trusted me enough to tell me, Neil. Even though I was being so terrible to you—"

"Please, Ginny," Neil interrupted. "I was terrible to you first."

Ginny made a doubtful noise in the back of her throat, though ultimately dropped the topic. They would be there all night, otherwise, debating which one of them was more at fault.

“Oh, and poor Knox, too… thinking that he’s hopeless.”

“Though he isn’t,” Neil affirmed.

“Though he *isn’t*.” Ginny hummed. “Perhaps that’s something to help with some later time,” she offered, a wry smile worming its way onto her face.

Neil, also, found himself grinning down at the soil scuffing up against his shoes. “Something to help with some other time…” he echoed, almost like a vow.

Neil was convinced that Charlie *could* return Knox’s affections, at least in some small part—but whenever he tried to bring the subject up to Knox, the other boy refused to hear Neil’s arguments out. Neil simply felt like it didn’t add up; all of the evidence he’d stowed away such, all of the animosity that existed between the two boys, all the shared talks and borrowed time and riddlesome poetry. Something of that calibre didn’t come about without *some* unvoiced feelings lying under it, *some* unspoken words hanging obvious in the air, *some* interest emanating from not one, but *both* sides. That’s how Neil reasoned it all, at least.

But Knox refused to listen to it, resigned to his fate. And as much as Neil would’ve liked to talk Ginny’s ear off about it, it was like she’d said. It was something for another time. For now—

Neil looked up, eyes soft even as his heart began to race. “Ginny,” he said.

“Yes?”

“What—” Neil wet his lips. “What was it you were saying about Todd?”

Neil studied Ginny’s face as she digested his inquiry, her brow furrowing something awful—and her eyes, her eyes which turned sharp and steely as an arrowhead.

“It’s fine if you can’t tell me,” Neil continued, watching Ginny as she glared out at the empty space in front of her. He leant forward with a gentle creaking of his swing, pulling her gaze back to him—an irresolute flick of the eyes, grim and purposeful, as Neil cleared his throat. “It’s fine, really. But… if it concerns his well-being, I’d like to know. I— I *need* to know. I don’t want to—”

“It’s not that I can’t tell you,” Ginny cut in, turning her focus away again, tone taking a foreboding dive. “It’s just… it’s something Todd should tell you himself.”

Neil nodded firmly, ready to leave the subject be.

But Ginny kept going.

“But… he *won’t*,” she muttered, almost to herself. “He *should*, but he *won’t*. Because, well…”

“He doesn’t think he’s worthy of sympathy,” Neil filled in, cheerlessly.

“No,” Ginny agreed, her voice equally bereft of mirth. “He doesn’t. It’s… it’s not his fault, I’m sure you know. When you’ve been told something like that for so long, well… of course you’d start to believe it. So, no, he’s not going to tell you himself. But…”

Neil pitched forward even further. “…but?”

“But you’re right,” Ginny relented. “You’re *right*. You need to know it. If you’re planning on… *talking* to him, about *this*—” She gestured vaguely with her hands, the movement gentle—despite how Ginny’s fingers curled into fists as she placed them back into her lap. “—then yes. You need to know it.”

Neil kicked at the muddy earth his feet were resting on, his grip on the chains of the swing going rigid. “What is it?”

Ginny looked up, the firmness falling from her face—replaced, instead, with a simple, devastating sadness. She deliberated a moment longer, chewing on her lip again, before finally glancing back forward. Her voice, when she spoke, sounded drained.

“Well, it’s— It’s why he came to Ridgeway,” she explained. “He… he got kicked out of Balincrest.”

Neil gave a small nod, hoping Ginny caught it out of the corner of her eye. “I know. He’s told me.”

Ginny, however, shook her head once more. “He didn’t tell you *why*, though, did he?”

Neil held his lungs still, not daring to breath as he spoke. “He… he didn’t,” he said, feeling the blood flowing through his veins turn to ice. He didn’t want to ask the question—and it was *the* question, not *a* question. It took all his will then, to swallow, force out his next words. “What— What was he kicked out for?”

“Well…” Ginny began, voice shaking. “Todd… Todd got caught.”

She picked at her cuticles as the cold of the metal bit into Neil’s palm, his knuckles strangling the swing’s chains. She took a long breath in, a wind-up to the punch Neil could see coming—and yet could do nothing to prevent. He was helpless to watch, to *listen*, as Ginny breathed out the next lines, pain lining her words.

“Todd got caught…” she said, again. “…with another *guy*.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Easter, to those who celebrate :) crazy to think that I posted the first chapter of this fic on CHRISTMAS. and. its still going. huh. thought I'd finish it by now but we're getting there

also title is from Nomad which means we've officially got at least one lyric from every song off of Clairo's Charm □□□ everybody say 'thank you clairo for your incredible songs and also for having bernie sanders at your coachella performance'

To Being Different, Being Young

Chapter Summary

> Neil reflects on some recent events, faced with a decision that he knows he must make.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“A *guy*?”

“Yes, a *guy*. This was when—”

“No, no. Stop— *Stop*. You’re… certain it was a *guy*?”

Neil folded his arms over each other, tucking his hands—ungloved, and therefore, almost numb—under his armpits. With a shiver he leant backward, resting against the cold, brick wall behind him.

“Yes, Knox,” Neil sighed, words clouding over in the brisk air. “Ginny —quite *plainly*—said Todd was caught… with a *guy*.”

Saying the line only sparked anew the memory, eating away at Neil as it had been for several nights. He pulled his arms even tighter around him, bracing his knuckles against the rough of his duffel coat; a white-hot spike of *something* threatened to rise up his throat, acidic and bitter, as the details floated back into the forefront of his mind. The clinking of chains, the creaking of a wooden frame, the lilting of a soft voice—a soft voice, speaking with such a heavy, dire tone.

Knox gave up on fussing with the knobs and dials of the radio at his knees, pushing back down the sleeve he’d rucked up to avoid the live

wires poking out the system. He spun his attention, instead, towards Neil, dropping the headset he'd previously been holding cocked to his ear—the static chittering out of the speakers dropped off as Knox flicked the switch, having clearly given up on deciphering the vague instructions Meeks and Pitts had left them with.

"I'm sorry, but… I'm not sure I follow," Knox remarked, brushing off where his pant legs had sat atop the stone, grey flecks crumbling off of them. He tilted his face, knitting his brow. "Isn't this *good* news?"

Neil felt his jaw tense up its line, to the curve of his ears. The indignation spilled so readily from his lips, he almost choked on it—

"*Good news*?" he sputtered out.

Knox slowly manoeuvred his way over, dancing his feet around the hi-fi system. There was precious little space on the roof of Welton's tower—littler still, when a large portion of floor was taken up by a homebuilt radio and its multitude of tendrillar wires. One such wire snuck over Neil's shoulder, up towards the spire at his back, making for the antenna attached to its weathervane.

So it was that Neil and Knox had to swap positions; Knox placing himself on the opposite side of the antenna wire, and Neil circling around to crouch beside the radio.

"I mean, I said it before, didn't I?" Knox posited, head set back on the wood of the door leading back down. "I said that you… *you* have a real chance, with *him*. And, well… if he's— if what Ginny says is true, then… now you know that for sure."

Neil scoffed, loud and loaded with scorn, before scooping up the discarded headset and hooking it over his neck—nesting it atop his

collar, like a tie with its knot picked loose. He turned his attention down towards the radio, revisiting the same vague instructions Knox had surmised to be unintelligible. He conjured forth images of the evening prior, when Meeks and Pitts had given their own demonstration.

"What?" Knox asked, as Neil clicked the radio's switch on once more, the fizzing white noise swarming up from around his neck. "Are you… Are you *upset* that he's…?"

"I'm not upset about *that*," Neil spat, twiddling the dials distractedly. It had looked so easy when Meeks and Pitts had done so, showcasing the device at the latest meeting.

But then again, *they* had had it working since *September*, a long time before any of the other poets were allowed to lay a finger on it. The device hadn't been deemed safe for the quote-on-quote *public* to use until yesterday—when Meeks and Pitts had presented it to the boys at the cave, the copper of the wires shining in the firelight. And Neil thanked the god, restored back onto its stepladder pedestal, that they had. He'd had no clue what the group would've done without the device being passed around—besides all refusing to acknowledge the one, notable absence from their midst.

"Are you… Are you upset that I missed the meeting last night?" Knox tried, slightly gentler with his tone this time around. "I told you, Neil, it'd only be *more* awkward if we tried to pretend—"

"No, Knox," Neil huffed, sliding his hand down the radio's side. As he did, he misplaced his fingers, and earnt himself a minor shock on the ball of his thumb. He sucked in a pained breath—*safe for the public, his foot*—and, mimicking Knox's earlier action, pulled up his sleeve so as to be able to manoeuvre around the wiring better. "That was… That was *fine*."

As dripping with annoyance as Neil's voice was, he *was* telling the truth. Knox hadn't missed out on much, really; the meeting had consisted primarily of all of the poets handing the 'safe' radio system around the circle—marvelling at the intricacies of its electrical work, bemoaning the choppy signal the cave received, ignoring that both Neil and Charlie's hearts hadn't been truly in it. Neil, because he was still digesting all of Ginny's words from earlier in the week, circling his mind like storm clouds. And Charlie, well—

Charlie, ever since the disaster of the meeting he'd brought the Henley girls too, had been oddly silent. He grew quiet, constrained, whenever Knox was around—but was far worse whenever he *wasn't*, which was *always* now that the two were actively avoiding each other.

Which, apparently, now included Knox skipping their Friday night gatherings in the woods.

Though Neil supposed that if Knox hadn't done as much, he wouldn't have been approached by Meeks and Pitts the very next day—*today*, Neil thought, that very morning, in the common room—to ask if he wanted to have a look at the radio as well, up on the roof, where it actually managed to capture some stations with its antenna. Which meant that Neil would've missed the golden opportunity to insert himself, to claim that he hadn't gotten a proper look the night before, to weasel his way into the perfect situation to talk with Knox privately.

And Neil *needed* to talk with Knox—had been practically buzzing to, ever since his conversation with Ginny.

"Well, then," Knox announced. "Why *are* you upset?"

Neil reached for another dial on the radio, for what—if his memory served—would alter the frequency currently crackling out of the

headset. As he did so, he failed to gauge the distance between his wrist and one of the cowlick copper filaments, and was thusly delivered another—slightly less *minor*—shock.

"Shit!" he cursed, flinching backward, reminding himself that this bundle of wires and knobs was two of his closest friends' proverbial *baby*—the results of months of stashing away stolen materials, tinkering away at circuits, keeping the entire system hidden from any members of the staff—and therefore, Neil *couldn't* smash it into tiny pieces, however primed and readied his fist was to do so. Instead he tore off the headset, placing it back down on the ground, before standing brusquely; leaving it to hiss out of both ends on the cold, stone roofing. Neil shuffled around until he was resting against the tower's balustrade, before looking up at Knox who was—like he'd done so many times before—staring at Neil, oh-so patiently.

"Well?"

Maybe not *so* patiently.

Neil exhaled through his teeth, turning his attention out towards the view of the Welton grounds. Neil could understand the appeal that Meeks and Pitts both saw in squirreling themselves away up here, at the topmost point of Welton—even if they'd both argue it was only for the signal. One could practically see all around Welton from the tower's vantage point, from the groundskeeper's shed by the lake to the flower beds directly below. It was beautiful, serene and crisp in the foggy morning. The forest to Neil's left, curving into the slope of the hill, leading down to the *dock*—

"God," Neil exclaimed. "It's… It's not *good* news, Knox."

"How come?" Knox asked, not pressing—only curious.

“You didn’t—” Neil tapped his fingers on the balustrade, spinning his attention away from the edge. “You didn’t hear the full story, Knox.”

Neil could hear Knox push himself off of the wall, land back on it, cushioning his fall with his hands. “Then enlighten me,” he said.

Neil slumped down, the carved embellishments of the low wall cutting into his spine. He remembered the near imperceptible lean Ginny had in her seat as she recited the words, strain tinting her voice. “Todd, he — He got kicked out of Balincrest for it, Knox. It’s the reason he had to *move schools*.”

“Okay,” Knox replied, nodding. “I get it. It’s… It’s not good news.”

Neil shook his head, fingers raking through his fringe. Knox *didn’t* get it.

“You *don’t* get it,” Neil spoke aloud. “They— Y’know, they couldn’t even put it on the expulsion letter?”

Knox took a second to respond. “They… can’t put that he got caught —?”

“Of course they *can’t*,” Neil interrupted, a laugh almost bubbling up as he said it. He swallowed it back down, a bitter taste flooding his mouth. “Balincrest’s like Welton. It’s all about legacy, reputation… Of course they can’t put *that* as the reason.”

“Because it would reflect badly on them,” Knox murmured. “So…

what did they put, then?"

Neil had asked the very same question, that night at the park. He responded to Knox, now, as Ginny had to him.

"Does it matter?" he said. "Everybody knew the real reason, anyway." Neil pulled his arms from where they rested—one atop the balustrade, the other combing through his now dishevelled hair—and draping them over his knees. The image of Ginny's own, shaking in her lap as she continued, came to Neil. As did her words, her voice hollowed and removed as she spoke them. "Except— Except his parents."

Knox, who'd been staring past Neil over to the lake, locked eyes with the other boy again. "His parents didn't know?"

"They didn't," Neil replied, feeling that same white-hot something building in the scathe of his tone, the numbness creeping back into his fingers. "They didn't. Why would they? They don't care about him. They didn't even care enough to read the private, *concerned* letter the school wrote them, detailing Todd's… *proclivities*."

"Oh." Knox studied the floor, and Neil felt the chill of the brick behind him and the stone beneath him sink through his coat.

"They didn't *know*—" he repeated, quieter, under his breath. "Not— Not until winter break, at least."

Knox took a sharp breath in, choking on the air. But Neil was barely aware of him; lost in the memory of how dire Ginny's expression had turned, speaking the very words that Neil was echoing now.

“It was… It was winter break, and Todd’s brother—Jeffrey Anderson, *the* Jeffrey Anderson—was over. He— He was over, and only trying to be helpful…” Ginny’s voice had broken, as Neil’s did as well. Ginny’s voice had broken fretfully, a branch snapping under weight. Neil’s voice broke like a rib, a fist striking the torso. “He found the letter. He found it, and he gave it to Todd’s parents without knowing what it was.”

“God.”

Neil pulled his knees to his chest. “Todd, he… he spent a lot of time around at the Danburry’s, those holidays.”

That had been the one, single solace that had come from Neil and Ginny’s conversation on the swing set; caught between clay and cloud, day and night, fall and winter. It was how warm Ginny’s voice had turned when she spoke about her family’s role in the whole ordeal—her words flushed with pride, talking of how Todd was offered hospitality into their home.

“*His parents had wanted even less to do with him*,” she’d recounted, tone murderous. “*How? How can you want that? God, I— I almost went over there and yelled at them... My* dad *almost went over and yelled at them*.”

“*Your dad?*” Neil had replied.

Ginny had almost grinned at the memory, might’ve done so if not for the subject matter. “*Of course. He was furious.*”

Neil had been reminded, then, of what Ginny had said so much earlier, back when they were both eating colourful pastries one Sunday afternoon. About her father having taken Todd aside at some point, telling him that he was always welcome in the Danburry

household.

Neil had always thought that Mr. Danburry was odd, his homely behaviour unbecoming for everything he was—a doctor, a father, an authority figure.

Neil was beginning to think that, just maybe, that was how a father was *supposed* to act.

The conversation had moved on from there, Ginny peering upwards and meeting Neil's eyes with both purpose and pain as she continued. Continued onto the topic which—

Well, Neil had been upset before.

But not like he'd been after *that*.

He leapt onto his feet, hands going to his hair again. "And you want to know the *worst* part?"

"What?"

Neil let his hands fall onto the balustrade, his fists gripping the low wall, the view down dizzying as he stared out into the abyss of the fall. He felt certain that the enamel of his canines would split, the way his entire jaw was *tensed*, locked up.

"The worst part," he snarled, "is the *guy*."

“The guy?”

“The guy Todd got caught with,” Neil snapped, trying and failing to keep the vitriol from clawing its way out of his lips. “They— They got caught, and you know what he *did*?”

Knox gulped behind Neil. “What?”

Neil dropped his tone, dark and damned. His fists went white-knuckled on the stone, the grain of it engraving itself into the flats of his palms. “He threw Todd under the *bus*— Denied everything, claimed that Todd manipulated him into it—” This time, Neil couldn’t help the caustic laugh that escaped him, high and shallow as it echoed around the rooftops of Welton. “God, *God*— As if Todd would manipulate a single *ant*—”

Neil hadn’t heard Knox walk over to him. But he felt it when a hand landed on his shoulder, pulling him gently away from the edge Neil was leaning over.

“Neil, breathe,” Knox instructed.

Neil didn’t want to *breathe*.

He wanted to continue on speaking, to drag the names of everyone in the twisted narrative—Todd’s brother, Todd’s parents, the accursed *guy*—drag them all through the mud, where they belonged. He wanted to run to Todd, probably holed up in his room now, in the hellish household and all of the callousness that came with it. He wanted to assure him that he’d never been wrong, not for a moment since he’d entered the world; that he’d only been *wronged* himself, and Neil was

sorry for it, *all* of it, no matter if it was his fault or not.

Neil wanted, for a steel-sharp second, to cycle down to town, catch the next bus that would take him over to the neighbourhood where his family house resided. He wanted to venture through the gates in the yard, twist open the door with his spare key, tiptoe down the main hallway. He wanted to enter his father's study, walk over to his desk, and unlock the drawer that he knew contained—

Neil took a deep, shuddering breath in, collapsing atop the balustrade. He was shaking, he realised, Knox's hand on his shoulder an anchor.

"God, Knox," Neil whined, voice slipping until it was barely a whisper. Even only a whisper, however, it still trembled with that white-hot something—Neil imagined the feeling might be rage, scalding as it boiled over the walls of his stomach, but that wasn't quite right. "It's unfair. It's *unfair*. How can he be put through so much? It's *unfair*."

"I know, I know," Knox said—but he *didn't*, did he? Neil shook his hand off of his shoulder, sitting himself back down beside the radio.

"There was something else, too," Neil uttered.

"Hm?" Knox crouched down across from Neil, the wires humming in the air between them as the hi-fi system sat between their feet.

"Ginny…" Neil thought of the park again, Ginny's gentle rocking on her swing as she spoke to Neil's bleeding heart, voice pleading—yet brimming with purpose. "She asked me something."

"What did she ask?" Knox queried.

Neil picked up the radio, spinning it around in his hands to find its switch. It, however, was already on, still spitting static from its headset; Neil yanked it back over his neck, letting the sound fester in his ears as he gripped the connected device—the electrical equivalent of the Gordian knot.

"She asked… she asked if I would do that. If I could stand not doing that, not taking the easy route out. If— If I would run away, if I was caught. Tell them it was somebody else's fault. If I would act like *him*."

Knox eyed Neil as he twisted at the dials, twisted and twisted and twisted. His pointer finger slipped past the frame for a moment when Neil's movement was too hurried, and a sharp stinging pain filled the end of it. Neil set his jaw, and continued.

"I laughed, when Ginny asked me that," Neil recounted. "Of course I wouldn't. I *wouldn't*. I wouldn't act like that *bastard*. I wouldn't do something like that, not to Todd. I would never…" Neil found another dial, pinched it between his sore fingers, spun it clockwise until it couldn't spin any farther. Nothing happened, save for the static loudening from Neil's collar. He spun the dial all the way back. "But— But I couldn't say any of that."

"Why not?"

Neil almost dropped the radio, had to catch it at an odd angle—which, of course, resulted in a jolt as the far side of his palm landed on some open wiring. Neil swore, readjusted the device in his hands, began fiddling with the knobs frantically.

"Because I don't *know*—"

Neil continued to poke and prod at the apparatus that Meeks and Pitts had spawned into the world. Why they felt the need to add so many parts to it was something between them and God—as was why Neil couldn't press a single switch on it without getting bitten on the hand with another *zap*. His movements were becoming sloppy, more impatient, and that meant he was only more likely to receive a shock for his efforts.

"What don't you know?"

Neil, somehow, managed to make the entire system release a *spark*, which arced out into the bright morning and fell atop his wrist, one final burn which made Neil's hand spasm and drop the radio entirely —

"I don't know if I can promise that!"

Knox threw out both of his arms, managing to catch the hi-fi system before it clattered onto the stonework. Neil ripped the headset from his neck, the tightness of it hanging less like a tie and more like a *noose*. He pushed it into Knox's hands, forcing his own raw ones into his pockets. The pains of where he'd been burnt were contained within points of feeling, the rest of the flesh numb, pinpricks of sensation like stars poking through the velvet sky.

"I can't… I can't promise that."

Because that was the thing, wasn't it? Neil could vow not to ruin Todd's life all over to again, that he wouldn't take Todd's heart out of his chest and smash it to pieces for the however many'th time. But he wouldn't *know*—he wouldn't know until it happened, until he was faced with the impossible choice.

After everything Todd had been subjected to, all of the rejection, cruelty, hardship, if there was even the chance that Neil could betray him like the rest—

Well.

Neil would rather throw himself over the balustrade not a step away from him, land amidst the garden beds below, bones bent and betrayal pouring out of his broken skull.

Because Neil despised the guy who had turned away from Todd, who had blamed him for everything they'd both been involved in. Who had chosen to save his own skin, rather than help spare a single sliver of Todd's. So what if he'd been afraid? There was a difference between being afraid and being a coward, a cretin, a craven worth less than dirt—

But Neil didn't know that he wouldn't be the same. Hadn't he, only a month ago, been so willing to shirk Todd's attention at the very idea of a kiss between them? He would've gladly pushed the boy away, if it meant he could reside in a world where his love was *safe*—if unsatisfactory. He'd almost waltzed right past Todd in his hour of need, because of nothing more than the *notion* that these feelings were so unacceptable, so unthinkable, so shunned—

"I mean—" he muttered, voice barely scraping above a whisper. "I mean, I can hate the guy all I want. Which I *do*, so *damn* much, but…"

"But…?" Knox asked, carefully placing the radio back down.

Neil dug his hands as far into his pockets as he could. "But… who's to say I won't do something like that to Todd as well?"

Neil, abruptly, found himself able to name that white-hot *something* coursing through him—it wasn't rage, he discovered, despite how tightly he'd jammed his knuckles into the inner linings of his blazer pockets. It wasn't concern, as much as Neil wished it could've been. It wasn't even *jealousy* (not that Neil could ever mistake that feeling again).

It was *dread*. Iron and spiked, clawing up past his lungs, winding itself around his windpipe.

"It'll be alright, Neil," Knox tried, but Neil was shaking his head before the other boy had even finished his sentence.

"You don't know that, Knox," he retorted, finding himself—once again—leaning back against the cold brick of the spire. "You *can't* know that. None of us can. We don't even know if we'll get tomorrow."

Knox hummed. "But you're smart, Neil," he explained. "And *determined*. I— I won't say it's a good thing to hear, what you— What Ginny told you." Knox crouched back down, twisting the wire of the headset around his fingers. "But it's a good thing she told you. You know what *not* to do, Neil, and you'll figure out the rest. I'm sure of it."

Neil couldn't help his reply. "Like you're so *sure* running from Charlie is what *you* want?"

Knox yelped, and when Neil turned his gaze back down he saw him with his pinky finger in his mouth, retracted from the wire he'd been twirling it with. "That's— That's different."

“Is it?” Neil crooned.

Knox started picking at the knobs and dials again. “It is,” he mumbled, weakly. “I’m— I’ll *be* better. I just— I just need some space from him.”

“*Why*?”

Knox flinched, and from what source—the deathtrap set before him, or the harshness of Neil’s words—Neil couldn’t tell.

“Because I’m sick of caring about someone who doesn’t care about me, Neil.”

Neil slumped against the stone. “And *this* is better?”

Knox didn’t look up. “I don’t know,” he sighed. “I don’t… I don’t know.”

Neil knew. He’d seen Knox *droop* over the past week, had heard the watery tone creeping into his voice as of late—had caught him staring out of the windows of Welton at the bare branches of trees scratching at the glass, quiet and lost in thoughts he never shared. He might not have noticed the behaviour before, but now—

Now, Neil couldn’t help but feel as if it was an *omen*, a sign of things to come.

Beside the wall Neil rested against, on the other side of the heavy-set door, there came a light knocking. Knox and Neil both froze, sharing a

look—the entryway to the roof may be left unlocked and unguarded, but it was by no means an *endorsed* zone for students to hang about. Neil watched as Knox's eyes flitted towards the door cautiously, while his hands tried subtly to switch off the headset yammering static in his ear.

However, when only Meeks' voice rung through, both boys—in unison—let loose the breaths they'd been holding.

"Knox? Neil? Are you done yet?"

Neil leant over, yanking at the handle—rusted over with age and disuse. His hands were still numb, and he barely felt it when the welts gooseprickling his palm came into contact with the metal. As the wood eased off its hinges it *sunk*, the mechanism of the knob the only factor that kept it level in its frame, and the door swung open to reveal a shock of red hair and a slightly frazzled, freckled face—the fist attached to it still raised as if to knock once more.

"Finished your Latin study?" Neil queried.

Meeks nodded. "Could've come up earlier, really, but Cameron needed some help. And Charlie."

Neil didn't need to turn around to know how Knox would've gone *slack* at the mention. So instead he thumbed behind him, pushing himself off of the wall and into the doorframe.

"Terrific," he said, pushing past Meeks. "It's all yours."

And as behind him Knox began stammering about not being able to

get the radio working—Neil took the rickety stairs back down to his dorm, two at a time.

It was a surprisingly bright afternoon, for what had been such a thoroughly mist-smothered morning. The sky was marbled with what could charitably called *blue*, the foreign glitter of sunlight catching on the dewdrops left behind in the trees—a reminder of the wintry weather that had been, and that very well may come again if one got their hopes up.

Neil had thought that the sparse sun might've meant it would be less frigid, walking around Welton grounds. Though as always seemed to be the case nowadays, he'd been wrong; the relatively cheery weather did nothing to thaw the world below it, now positively *arctic* thanks to the wind blowing off of the lake.

At least Neil remembered his gloves, this time—even if the wool provided as little barrier against the elements as the rest of his garments, practically threadbare against the cold. Worse still, every time Neil turned his Latin textbook over in his hands—a steady weight, rolling across his palms—the spine would press the fuzz of the gloves into the sores still scored into his skin, alighting his pain all anew.

His pain, as well as the memories that accompanied it.

Knox didn't *get it*.

Neil had hoped he would.

But he *hadn't*.

Neil sighed, his breath turned to fog that *glowed* in the momentary sunlight; pure, crystal *white* like freshly fallen snow. Then he turned his eyes back downward towards the open page held in his stinging hands, the Latin review he'd told himself he'd complete—nay, *promised* himself he'd complete—before the afternoon was over. The test wasn't for another week or so, but the opening night of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* wasn't too far behind; before rehearsals ramped up, Neil needed to stay ahead of his subjects.

It was how he'd been managing, ever since first forging his father's signature on the letter of permission. Neil would spend as much of his spare time as he could studying, pencilling essays, filling out practice tests—all so he could scrounge up the perfect grades that he knew were required of him. But once that was all taken care of, Neil was free to indulge his hunger for the theatrical arts to his heart's content, ducking off into that thespian otherworld only a short bike ride away. It was a careful balance, teetering between all-nighters, early assignments, late arrivals—but Neil *wanted* to make it work.

And so it did.

But even as he focused his attention on the first example atop the paper—a simple *Ne timueritis* which, appropriately, he wasn't terrible daunted by—Neil found that he couldn't redirect his mind's attention as easily as he could his body's. His thoughts lingered on the swing sets, on Todd's circumstances; described in Ginny's words, retold by Neil's hand, and now with Knox's opinion thrown in with the rest of it.

Neil pencilled in *hortatory, perfect* beneath the example and moved down the page, voices twisting like coils of copper through his skull.

It wasn't that Knox was… *wrong*, per se. It was just that he was broaching the matter at a crooked angle, viewing it from a skewed perspective—seeing patterns in the shadows that were, in Neil's opinion, of far less consequence than the shapes cast on the cave wall itself. Knox's heart was in it, but not with the right direction.

Knox only wanted what was best for Neil.

But Neil wanted what was best for *Todd*.

And just maybe—

Just maybe those two ideas weren't as congruent as they'd seemed initially.

Neil followed further down the margin as he crunched along the pathways around Welton's grounds, all veritably abandoned—apparently, no other boys were fool enough to abandon the warmth of the common room fire for a change of scenery. The next example read *Utinam ne spretus esses*, and Neil squinted down at the paper, feeling accused. After a moment of deliberation, he scrawled down *pluperfect adaptive*, adding the addendum *past, contrary to fact* beneath, before moving on.

Neil wasn't entirely sure on where he stood about Ginny divulging to him what she did. By her own word, it wasn't her story to tell, wasn't her secret to reveal; after all, she couldn't be certain that Todd would be comfortable with Neil holding such a personal anecdote. Neil wasn't sure that *he* felt comfortable with holding it, however loath he was to inflict any further harm upon the boy.

On the other hand, however—that was the whole point, wasn't it? Todd wasn't likely to be agreeable to *any* story being spread, if it

would earn him even an aliquot of sympathy. And that wasn't because he felt as if it was patronising, or disingenuous, or because he'd grown sick of it—

It was because he'd been taught, all his life, that he hadn't been *deserving* of it.

Was that really a narrative Neil wished to feed into?

The third example read out *Quem audiret Cupido?* and Neil stared at the words until he was forced to blink away the drying of his eyes. The question itself leapt out to him, regardless of whatever use and condition it held.

Thanks to Ginny, Neil knew how he *shouldn't* proceed with Todd. And after mulling it over, Neil thought, just maybe—

Maybe he shouldn't proceed *at all*.

Knox had been focussed on Neil, but it was never about *him*. It wasn't about whether or not Todd was… *inclined* in such a way that was *convenient* for all the daydreams Neil imagined during particularly dull trigonometry lessons. Or that it stirred Neil to such a violent fervour, picturing some boy whose name he didn't know, that he'd accidentally snapped a pencil in his last lab. It wasn't even about the fact that that very stirring itself showed Neil's devotion for the other boy, a committal past simply *caring* and leagues beyond simply *interest*.

It wasn't about that, it was about *Todd*—

And what an utterly wretched hand he'd been dealt by the fates, the

universe, the stars—by *God*, if indeed there was one; the one that was preached about in choirs under the colours of stained glass, not the one lit by firelight sitting atop a stepladder in the woods. It seemed to Neil that Todd had not been given a single *break*, not ever, not since he was allowed to breathe and tumble and cry into the world. To be subjected to tragedy after tragedy, frustratingly preventable and yet torturously inevitable; pain after pain, burden after burden, one step after another, downwards, *always downwards*.

Neil wanted to believe he'd play no part in such play.

But if there was a *chance*? However minute, however small—

It would be too much.

Perhaps for Todd.

Definitely for Neil.

So maybe then, it was best to simply…

…give up.

Neil paced around a corner, passing brick arches shouldered atop stone pillars. He was just about to spin on his heel, turn back the way he came to commence another loop of Welton's grounds, when something caught his attention—a figure, not far off from where Neil stood, positioned almost dead-centre within Welton's gardens. Neil slowly began to pace forward, his feet moving of their accord. The boy—because it *was* a Welton student, as evidenced by the coat—had his back facing Neil, hovering over a planter box with his hands placed on

its side. Neil couldn't help but find the whole posture familiar, but he had to squint against a break in the clouds to see who it was—

"Charlie?"

Charlie wheeled around, eyes widening—when he saw it was only Neil, he turned away again, something like a scoff escaping the back of his throat. Neil closed the remaining distance, placing himself beside the boy.

"Charlie?" Neil asked again, trying and failing to catch the other boy's eyes. "What are you doing out here?"

Charlie shrugged, a pointed hike of his shoulders. "Jesus— Can't a guy just enjoy the gardens, Neil?"

Neil cast his gaze around, considering their surroundings. Welton loomed before them, huge and brick and grey despite the sun. What was known as the 'gardens' to the staff and student body wound about the side of the main hall, an arrangement of both level and raised beds —enclosed by trees and spotted with planter boxes, such as the one Charlie had his fists propped atop the side of. The lip of the wood met him at the waist, and he hunched over it at an odd angle as he peered in—at *what*, Neil had no clue.

For as beautiful as the gardens looked in the fall, when the parents were directed to bid their farewells to the children along the flower-lined paths, it was a different story come winter. In the early autumn, sunflowers towered at the corners of the beds like posts, rose bushes fluffed out the foliage beneath, and wildflowers spilled out of the planter boxes; hues of yellow, pink, and purple cascading over the brims, like careful strokes of paint brushed over the scenery. It was—

Well.

It *had* been beautiful.

But all of that had faded with the turning of seasons. All the colours that once bloomed in the space had since browned, falling as dead as the leaves that once coated the branches above. The flowers which had once overflowed onto the path were now reduced to nothing more than shrivelled stems and wilted petals, turned into mulch underfoot by the traffic of students.

Neil gestured around at the bleakness of it all. “Not much to enjoy,” he pointed out, cheerlessly.

Charlie stared down into the planter box he was bracing himself against, studying the blackened clumps of dead stems therein. The wildflowers that they once were were withered, now taken by the cold —the stalks snapping under their own dead weight.

Charlie chuckled, mirthlessly. “You’re not wrong.”

Neil tilted his head to the side, leaning over towards the other boy. “Then… why are you *really* out here?”

Charlie flicked his eyes over, carefully. “Why are *you* here?”

Neil held out his still-open Latin textbook, showing off the list of examples he’d barely made a dent in. Charlie’s eyes dropped to it, the sides of his mouth ticking outwards, before he moved his gaze back to the flowers below him.

“Hm,” was all he murmured.

Neil pulled back the book, wavering upon spying the lines upon lines of incomplete study—but ultimately, he snapped it shut, only slightly wincing as the movement pressed into where the wires had bitten him. He then proceeded to tuck it under his arm, pocketing his pencil before settling besides Charlie.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

And even though he wasn’t facing him, Neil could practically *hear* the disinterested roll of Charlie’s eyes.

“What’s wrong with *you*?” Charlie retorted. Neil didn’t rise to the bait.

“Charlie.”

“Neil.”

“*Charlie*—”

“Damnit, Neil—” Charlie cut himself of as he swivelled his head, posture craning so that he could glare up at the other boy. “It’s none of your *business*.”

“Of course it is,” Neil responded. “You’ve been acting weird for… a *while*, now. We’re… We’re *worried* about you, you know.”

Charlie tapped his fingers against the wooden edge they held onto, an impatient staccato. “And who’s *we*, Perry?”

Neil waved with his hands, spinning them in vague circles. “All of the poets, obviously. Mr. Keating, probably— He’s definitely noticed you being… *less* disruptive, in class. I mean, I wouldn’t be surprised if *Stick* could sense something’s up—”

“*All* of the poets?” Charlie interrupted, coarse and critical. “Are you sure about that?”

“Look,” Neil replied, the word a deep breath. “If this is about *Knox*—”

Charlie smiled, lips pulled tightly over his gums. “Please, who said anything about—”

“—you should know that he’s worried about you, too.”

Charlie laughed, a thin trail of mist curling out of his rueful expression. “Well, then. He certainly has a funny way of showing that. *Although*…” He cast his eyes dangerously towards the tower, at the distant wires hanging off of the weathervane. “…I suppose you’d know better than anyone else about *that*.”

Neil refused to follow Charlie’s gaze, setting his heels in the dirt. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, Neil, please— Don’t be an *idiot*,” Charlie chided. “You and Knox… you’ve spent most of the past week off in your *corner of the*

world." Charlie, despite how light he sung the words, had a bitter edge to his voice. "I mean, don't get me wrong— It's great, really. If you're both happy to— To go off by yourselves, I mean, *go for it.* To hell with the rest of us, right?" Charlie reached a hand down, picking one of the withered flower stalks out of the loose soil, tearing it from its roots with a yank. He rolled it around his fingers, parts of its stem wall flaking off as he did. "It's *great* that you're enjoying yourselves so much. I wonder how long it'll be until you start skipping meetings, too —"

"You think we're—" Neil interjected, sputtering out the words. He cleared his throat, coughing into his fist. "You think *Knox* is happy?"

Charlie twisted the stalk in his hands, the fibre weakening until it broke in two. "Of course he is," he ground out, tossing the severed halves of the stalk aside and reaching for another from the box. "He hasn't spoken to me for— *Well.* If that's not cause for celebration, I'm not sure what is."

It was Neil's turn to laugh, a high, humourless sound. "Charlie," he said. "Knox is *miserable.*"

Charlie's arm paused where it was, suspended in the sunlit air, fingers half-furled around the empty, browned sepals of what had once been a bloom. His hesitation lasted only a moment, however, before his grip tightened and tore off the once-flower entirely.

"*Hah,*" Charlie barked, flatly. "In my— In *your* dreams, Perry."

"It's true," Neil insisted. "He's trying to not be… *obvious,* about it, but beneath that…?"

Neil thought on Knox's tight-lipped smiles, his woebegone staring in

class, his incessant reassurances that he was *fine* and that he had *come to peace with it* and that *this was just how things had to be*.

"…he's hurting, Charlie."

Charlie began to roll the dead, petalless flowerhead in his hand, tensing his fist into a ball and then opening it with his palm sloped down—letting flakes of plant matter tumble away, disappearing into the dirt at his shoes. Both boys were silent for a beat, before Charlie finally spoke up.

"I did that, didn't I?" His voice was clipped, offbeat.

"You did," Neil pushed, to which Charlie bristled. "Which means you need to fix it."

"By doing *what*, Neil?" Charlie pressed hard into the syllable, *what*, sounding as exasperated as he was resigned. "He doesn't want to speak with me."

Neil shook his head. "Because he doesn't know what you're going to speak with him *about*." The sun went out with a cloud, a shadow falling onto the pair of them. "He thinks… He thinks that you only care about *yourself*, Charlie. Or, well, anything but *him*."

Charlie wiped his hand aggressively against the leg of his pants. "And what do *you* think?"

Neil swallowed, propping out his hands atop the side of the planter box—resting his fists along the edge, mirroring Charlie's stance. "I think you do," he answered, staring down at the wilted flowers below.

If Neil squinted, he could imagine them how they were before winter had come; stems bright and dizzily green, wreathed in leaves and adorned with purple-white crowns of petals. “But you won’t admit it,” he sighed. “You’re scared.”

“Me? Scared?” Charlie asked, incredulous.

“Scared,” Neil affirmed, almost taunting.

“I’m not *scared*, Perry,” Charlie coughed out, insult coating his pitch. “I’m just not… *stupid*.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Charlie continued drumming his fingers, straying his eyes even further away from Neil’s. “I’m not going to try and… what is it that you want me to do? Go give some teary confession to Knox? Beg for his forgiveness? Cry for him to be— To be my *friend* again?” Charlie slumped his posture further over the wooden barrier. “Who are we kidding, Neil? I’d— I’d only mess it up again. Just like I’ve messed up everything else.”

“Come on, Charlie, you haven’t messed up everything else—”

Charlie laughed again, another shrill cackle echoing off of the drab brickwork of the school. “I have, Neil, I *have*. I messed up goddamn *everything*— I messed up with the article, I messed up with that meeting— I even messed up getting you with Ginny, somehow.”

Neil inhaled; sharp cold, cutting through the gaps of his clenched teeth. “You didn’t,” he tried, but was run over as Charlie continued.

“I’ve— I’ve screwed up everything I’ve *touched*. So, yeah, it’s no bloody wonder Knox doesn’t want to speak with me anymore—”

“You *didn’t*,” Neil repeated, more emphatically this time around. It was at least enough to break into Charlie’s sentence, have him stop dead in his tracks.

“I didn’t *what*, Neil?”

Neil gulped, thickly, feeling his throat constricting. “You didn’t— You didn’t mess up things. Between me and Ginny,” he choked out. He wondered, as his heart began to whip up in his chest, if this ever got easier; saying it aloud, even where no one but his trusted friends could hear. “There weren’t… *things* to mess up, really. I— I shouldn’t be saying this, but—”

Charlie spun himself around, meeting Neil’s gaze, eyes narrowing as he puzzled over his words.

“Back— Back when it all started, that first night— When I was put out, *jealous*, that wasn’t… that wasn’t because I was jealous of *Todd*.”

Charlie, realising, had his eyes immediately shoot back open. “Neil—” he hissed, but Neil only carried on.

“It— It took a little while for me to— To figure it out, but—”

Charlie took a step towards him, lips set in a thin line as his focus darted around the yard, scrutiny sent towards every wall, every

window. “*Neil*—!” he hissed, again, more urgent this time.

“I wasn’t in love with Ginny, in the end. I was— I was in love with—”

Charlie slammed his hand over Neil’s mouth, cutting off his confession. It was the same hand that Charlie had been snapping the flower stalks with; it smelt peppery, floral, just a little like soaked earth. Charlie, having determined the coast was clear, pulled his focus back in—setting his eyes straight through Neil’s, to the back of his skull.

“Are you *insane*?” he huffed, voice both quiet and laced with exertion. “Neil, you can’t— You can’t *say* that shit, Neil.”

Neil pushed Charlie’s hand off of his mouth, staggering backwards a step. “Why not? You should know—”

“No, no, *no*, Neil,” Charlie spat, falling forward into the space Neil had just ceded. “I *don’t*— I *shouldn’t*— Don’t tell me that, Neil. Not… not *here*. Not *now*.”

Neil took a long breath in, letting the rabbiting of his heart slow until it was no longer pulsing in his ears. He held his hands up, and Charlie —though his brow was still set—backed up a little, retreating to where he’d been standing before.

“Okay,” Neil relented, and Charlie seemed to relax, if only the tiniest amount. “I won’t— I *won’t*.” He lowered his hands. “But Charlie, don’t you get it? You *didn’t* mess that up. You *didn’t*.”

“Neil, God— Don’t *you* get it?” Charlie’s voice remained a low, harsh

whisper, though now it was more pained than it was urgent. “I *did*. Now— Now look at *you*, look at *Knox*. I mess up everything. And if I try something else… I’ll just mess that up, too.”

“But you should still *try*—”

Charlie’s mouth twisted into a sneer, a sour thing against the rest of his sore expression. “If you were me,” he retorted, “would you still *try*?”

And Neil opened his mouth to argue, when—

When it hit him.

He *wouldn’t*.

He *wasn’t*.

Because of the everything with Todd—Neil wasn’t even daring to reach out, to take hold of what could be. Because of that chance; the chance that felt more like an inevitability at this point, a prophecy waiting to be fulfilled. The chance that it all would end in tragedy, like everything else in Todd’s life. Could Neil promise that he’d be different, that he could somehow redirect the course of fate? Could he guarantee that he wouldn’t be just another hardship for Todd to face?

Could he be sure that if he were Charlie, he wouldn’t screw up again?

Charlie watched Neil, knowingly, as he snapped shut his open mouth.

Neil wanted, so terribly, to say something—

But to say anything would make him a hypocrite, he realised.

Above both of their heads, a single toll of Welton's bell resonated out into the sky, a hum of metal reverberating over them. Long, slow, and unmistakeable in its meaning. It meant—

"Dinner," Charlie muttered, turning back over the bed of broken stems. "Better get a move on, Perry."

"You're… not coming?" Neil asked.

Charlie didn't look up. "I'll… I'll catch up."

With the lingering echo of the bell still hanging in the cold air between them, Neil nodded, not certain if Charlie had even seen him do so or not—regardless, he turned back towards the school, picking his way down the pathway he'd come from. He eventually found his way into the hallways, where he was met with the swarm of students hurrying towards the dining hall.

Neil felt like a salmon swimming upstream, making his way up the staircase against the river of the crowd, trying to push past to his room—he still had his unfinished Latin work secured under his arm, and needed to deposit it onto his desk before he could follow the rest of the students to their meal. He stifled a curse as a lowerclassman accidentally trod on his toe, was forced to throw on a brittle smile and accept the polite, squeaky apology tossed his way from over the sea of heads.

“Neil!”

Neil pivoted, catching a flash of red hair as Cameron called out to him from the foot of the steps. Neil hung over the railing, calling back. “What?”

Whatever Cameron called back, face frantic and gestures panicked, was lost as the dinner bell sounded again. That, along with the cacophony of the crowd, washed away the other boy’s sentence, the only words Neil could make out being “—*your room*!” Neil waved him away, tried to motion that he’d talk to him at dinnertime, but Cameron began fighting his way back towards him.

Neil rolled his eyes, continuing onwards—faster, now that he was in emptier halls. Cameron had a habit of getting worked up over things, and Neil needed at least five minutes to clear his head before he wanted to sit through it.

He marched his way up to the door, the second ringing of the bell fading away along with the noise of the busy stairwell. He noted that his door was open, just a sliver, even though he’d been so certain he’d closed it before heading out for his Latin study. He placed a hand on the knob, cool even through his glove, the metal untouched by the heater inside. He took a moment—letting the quiet, the cold, the emptiness of it all etch itself into his mind.

Then he swung open the door, shucking his coat off, ignoring the distant “*Neil!*” he heard barrelling from a ways off down the hall. He picked out his pencil from the pockets, readjusted his grip on his book, turned to his desk—

And stopped.

Standing at his desk, his hand resting, white-knuckled, on the back of Neil's chair, was—

"Father."

"Neil."

Neil became only vaguely aware of his body, of his teeth gritting, jaw tightening—his stomach became a loose feeling, heavy and dark as a storm cloud as it sank to his feet; his lungs ballooned in his chest, pressing sharply against the points of his ribs; his heart jumped to his mouth, hard and heavy like a stone.

"I wasn't… I wasn't expecting a visit."

Neil's father stared down at the contents of Neil's desk, on the script booklet that he'd left out beforehand. Then he turned his cold eyes on Neil, fist still tensing on the chair.

"Why don't you close the door?"

For a second, the anger Neil had felt this morning *flared*—all bright, all consuming, a sudden and sharp sensation of skin prickling, adrenaline spiking, rebellious words forming on his tongue. Abruptly, Neil was taken over by the urge to *shout*; to cry, to condemn, to refuse to keel down without a good fight—and this *would* be a fight. Neil felt it like a leaden weight, the inevitability of it all, and *oh,* how he wished to never *beg* or *bemoan* ever again—

"And do it properly, this time."

As fast as it had come, the sensation drained from his body. And in sunk reality, tasting like ash in his mouth, feeling like ice in his blood. There was nothing but the hum of the radiator, the distant stampede of students, careful footsteps coming to a stop outside Neil's door. The tragedy that had to play out, that Neil could play no part in preventing.

Neil straightened himself.

"Yes, sir."

He turned on his heel, coat still draped over his arm. Before he twisted the knob, pushed it closed, he snuck a glance out into the hallway. Cameron was standing outside, just in view, and he shot Neil a sympathetic look. "*I tried to tell you*," he mouthed, lips turned downwards.

Neil nodded, his heart slowly dripping into the empty pit of his stomach. Then he pressed the door shut, squeezing his eyes closed, waiting to hear the *click* that meant he'd done it *right*.

He never did; the third, final ringing of the bell sounded over it, shaking through Neil's frame. It felt longer than the other two, the peal of it like distant thunder. To Neil, it sounded different—warped, distorted from what it normally was.

It sounded, he realised, just like a funeral knell.

And with that, he turned around.

Chapter End Notes

not busy next couple weeks my ASS i've been SWAMPED with assignments. Doesn't help that this chapter is twice as long as I meant for it to be sorry (?) anyway will likely take two weeks each to get the last three (?) chapters out, thank you for your patience :)
also yes this is still an anderperry fic, despite all evidence pointing to the opposite lol
anyway.
chapter title from 'pier 4'. thanks for reading and commenting as always <3

And It's Just A Little Thing I Can't Live Without

Chapter Summary

> Neil has some news he has to break, but finds some unexpected advice in the process.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil trundled down the stairs, his footsteps heavy—lead poured in his shoes, cross borne on his back. The hallway was cold, empty; the distant noises of students rushing off to the dining hall for breakfast echoing down it. Neil shivered as he walked towards its end, though he barely registered it; the bite of winter was a distant, detached feeling, affecting someone else, in some other place.

It was with numb, trembling fingers that Neil dialled the number on Welton's student telephone, the mechanical wheel clicking and sliding with every consecutive digit. Above the whole assembly was a single lamp, bulb flickering amidst the peeling paint on its shade. Neil listened to the tone ring out in his ears, took the moment to wipe at his eyes.

There were no more tears, of *that* Neil was grateful. He must've shed the last of them the night prior, in the quiet confines of his bed—doing his best not to wake his roommate, who had already been asleep when Neil traipsed back in from his visit to Mr. Keating's office.

Tears or no, however, his eyes were itchy now, stinging with all the hours of sleep that he'd refused himself; between imagining all the things he had to plan, all the plans he had to cancel, as well as sitting on the Captain's impossible request, he hadn't found much time for rest.

Because how on earth was he supposed to tell his father the *truth*? Neil couldn't speak like that, not in that way, not to his *father*. It would never work, and the truth of that had been enough to overpower any heat that either his blankets or radiator could provide—the frigid teeth of realisation had sunk into Neil's bones as he'd laid there, cheeks streaked and pillow soaked, his body trembling beneath his bedsheets. He'd shaken his head, knocking loose the tears gathered on his lash lines, at the thought.

Mr. Keating was lovely, caring, a warm, uplifting presence. But he was also… *idyllic* in his thinking, in his approach to life.

"*You have to show him who you are, what your heart is*," he'd said.

He didn't know Neil's father. He didn't know how truly *trapped* Neil was. Neil's father only cared for him as far as he could ace a test, hold a stethoscope, operate a scalpel. What Neil's heart *was* mattered little to him—he'd rip it out all the same if it meant a medical degree for his son.

The man would do *anything*, if it meant a medical degree for his son.

Neil's eyes were sore, yet still he was rubbing at them—turning the whites of them red, as the call connected with a staticky snap.

"Hello?" came Ginny's voice.

"Hi, Ginny," Neil breathed. He kept his voice quiet, contained—knowing that as soon as he gave it any body, it'd break.

"Neil?" Ginny asked, words crackling over the wire. "Is something

wrong?"

"No, no," Neil lied, begging his voice not to betray him as he ran a hand through his hair. "I just… wanted to give you a heads-up. For today."

"A… heads-up?" Ginny repeated, confused. "Neil, I've— I'm going out, soon, so…"

"Of course," Neil replied, falling against the wall with a thump. "Don't worry. I just wanted to let you know…" He felt his throat clogging up, forced the heaviness back down with a swallow—almost choking on it in the process, but swallowing it down regardless. "…that I've made my decision. *The* decision."

"Really?" Ginny's voice came out bright and expectant, anticipation filtering through the noisiness of the signal.

"Really," Neil confirmed, hoping the choppiness of the call disguised the nasally pitch to his voice . "And I have… something I need to tell you. As well."

"I look forward to it then," Ginny chirped. And Neil—

Neil didn't have the heart to tell her to feel any other way on the matter. He supposed there'd be time enough that afternoon for her to feel disappointed, *after* Neil broke the news to her; he decided that here, over the telephone, right before her day out, was no time to ruin her spirit.

"Sorry, Chris is outside—" Ginny said, pout audible. "I'll see you this

afternoon, Neil!"

"See you," Neil muttered into the transponder. Then with a *click*, the line went dead.

Neil remained there, slumped against the wall, waiting for the stinging in his eyes to subside. He watched the lamp flicker, listened to the distant noises of people, muffled through the endless walls, and suddenly felt so sick that he couldn't stomach waiting a minute longer —instead, he pushed himself off of the wall and began his long march back to his dorm room. He thought about breakfast, decided to skip it. He hadn't the appetite for neither food nor friends, and so stumbled his way away from the faint laughter and sweet smells.

He reached the stairs and took the steps one by one, letting gravity drag his feet into place. Once he was in his room, door shut behind him, he simply sat on the bed, head in his hands.

That was where he remained, rotting away the time, until he decided that it was best to—as he'd done, not so many days before—tear the bandage of the news off quickly and cleanly, rather than drawing the process out any longer than it needed to be. Perhaps, if he did that, Ginny would almost think it was *his* choice.

Neil carried himself out to the bikes outside, forgetting his gloves once again. His hands froze atop the handlebars, but he gripped them tightly regardless; he rode down to the Danburry household, moving without putting his motions to memory—the only proof of his actions being the physical evidence they left in their wake. He didn't remember packing his satchel, but there it sat in the front basket; he didn't remember pulling on his duffel coat, but there it was, wrapped around him; he didn't remember how long the ride had taken him, but here Neil was, standing before the whitewashed door that was all too familiar now.

The moment, for as many times as Neil had experienced it before, felt different to him this go around. Perhaps it was the finality of it; it wasn't as if Neil would never return here *again*, but it *would* never be the same as before—an irreversible change, initiated with nothing more than three, long, even knocks—*assertive, but not insistent*, just as he'd been taught.

He wiped, again, at his still-stinging eyes, scuffing his shoes on the welcome mat as footsteps pattered down the hallway on the opposite side of the door. Neil barely noticed it swing open, his mind only vaguely attached to his body.

"Oh! Neil!"

Neil glanced upward to see the jovial face of *the* Mr.— *Dr.* Danburry, grinning down at him. Warmth bled from the room behind him, washing over Neil like a long-held breath.

"Hello—" he began, stopping as soon as he felt the wetness leaking into his voice. He swallowed once more, tried again. "Hello, sir."

Dr. Danburry chuckled. "Please, Neil, I've said before— You can call me Joe."

Neil only found his shoulders straightening where he stood, pulling his spine out of his slouch. "Sorry, s— Sorry."

Dr. Danburry waved him off. "I'll let you get away with it this time, don't worry," he laughed, tone light. "Now… you're here to see Ginny, I presume?"

Neil, unsure of whether his next sentence would come out whole or not, only nodded.

"Ah, well, I'm afraid she's still out at the bakery…" Dr. Danburry tutted, tapping his finger against the doorframe. "Do feel free to come in while you wait, though. I'm sure she won't be long, now."

Neil, almost instinctively, took a step back, hands flailing. "No, I shouldn't—" He watched as Dr. Danburry's expression stuttered, caught off guard. "I just— I wouldn't want to intrude. I can…" Neil gestured back towards the street. "I can wait out here."

"In the cold?" Dr. Danburry inquired, tone laced with something dangerously resembling *concern*. He flitted his gaze down at Neil's ungloved hands, pocked with old electrical burns, tinted purple by the chill.

Neil stood as still as a statue on the top step, hands plastered to his sides and back ramrod straight. He tried to answer, but found the wetness spilling up his throat once more—and then Dr. Danburry stood to the side, began ushering Neil in, and he was left without a choice. Neil began to move; mechanically, automatically, as he'd been doing all day. His mind always a little behind behind body, his soul even further behind *that*.

Dr. Danburry, spectating Neil's march with a curious eye, directed him through the hallway, into the living room, and over to the couch—where Neil slowly lowered himself into the cushioned seat, attention falling onto the coffee table as the older man excused himself to the kitchen. Neil's limbs, he found, were at once limp and tensing all over; his senses were dampened, the sensation of his skin a distant feeling—and yet he had to pry his fingers off of his sleeves before he could hope to move them, the digits as stiff as stone.

Neil thought it was as if he was already a corpse, undergoing rigor mortis. Void of feeling, away from his corporeal form—strain cording through his muscles, gristle and sinew all petrifying as his body decayed before his eyes. He studied the pallid flesh showing past the purple on his hands, wondered if there was any blood flowing beneath it at all.

With effort, he pulled his neck around so that he was instead staring at the fireplace. It was a comfort, a warmth, and Neil was cold; and yet he'd taken a seat as far away from it as one could find in the room —Neil considered moving closer, snatching at the heat which wafted his way.

He didn't.

Instead, he stared until the bright licks of flame—laving up the brick of the mantle—slowly began to score themselves into his retinae. Until there were black shadows forming in Neil's vision, scars and silhouettes and slashes of soot framing his window of the world. Neil stared until it hurt, the sensation of it like little needles of pain peppering his eyes. It wasn't until the light of it blurred that Neil realised there were tears forming on his lower lids.

"Ah, Neil, I forgot to ask if you wanted tea," Dr. Danburry announced, sweeping back into the room carrying two steaming mugs. "But Ginny told me that you enjoyed it, and she seems to know— *Oh.*"

Dr. Danburry stopped as Neil turned towards him, before becoming suddenly aware of how he looked. Neil quickly rubbed his fists into his eyes, so hard that the scars turned to spintherisms. He tried to laugh it all off, but the noise came out shaking and pathetic—not helped by the involuntary sniffle it was followed up with. Dr. Danburry quickly set the mugs down on the coffee table, not bothering with coasters, before settling on the couch opposite.

“Hey, hey— Neil, are you alright?”

Neil pulled back and unwound his hands, watching them glisten wetly in the flicker of the fire—sparks swirling in his vision, head a heavy weight on his neck, the whole of him corpse-like.

“I’m fine,” he tried, drying his knuckles on his pant legs. “Just… stared into the fire too long.”

Dr. Danburry clicked his tongue at that, picking up a mug and pushing it into Neil’s hands—the warmth of the ceramic managing to melt the rigidity of his fingers, if only enough to accept the other man’s insistence.

“Please,” Dr. Danburry said, taking his own tea and nursing just below his chin. “I could see something was wrong before I even led you in here. It’s *not* the fire.”

“I’m *fine*,” Neil muttered. “I just— I—” He stopped, staring down at the steaming liquid swilling around his mug.

“Drink,” Dr. Danburry instructed. “It’ll help.”

Neil, grateful for any excuse not to *speak*, raised the tea to his mouth and took a microscopic sip. It was only a sip, but that was all it took to flush out the dryness from Neil’s mouth—honeying his throat as it travelled through his sternum, past his heart.

“Now— What’s eating you?” Neil moved to object, again, but Dr. Danburry cut him off before he could. “And know, Neil, that I *am* a doctor. It’s my whole job to help people. And it’s not only that—” He

set his mug down, laced his fingers together in front of him. “You seem like a decent guy, Neil, and Ginny cares a lot about you. You *can* tell me what’s wrong, if you need.”

Neil shuffled around in his seat, moving his gaze elsewhere. It caught on the bookshelves flanking the fire, the enormous tomes that inhabited them—as one small part of Neil’s conversation with Ginny, out on the swings, came back to him.

Specifically, the part where she’d mentioned her father, and how he had felt just as righteously furious at Todd’s parents as she had. How he’d welcomed the boy into their home, treated him so well. It reminded Neil, not for the first time, how vastly different Dr.— No, how different *Mr.* Danburry was from Neil’s own father. How much more homely and considerate he was, how much closer he was to what a father figure *should* be. It was that thought, more than anything else, which tipped Neil over the edge.

He took a deep breath in.

“I— I actually came here just to tell Ginny something,” Neil relented. “Then— Then I was going to head off early.”

Neil, though he found himself unable to look up from his drink, could practically hear Mr. Danburry’s eyebrow raise. “And… what were you going to tell her?”

Neil downed more of his tea, trying to gather what courage he could from it. “I’m—” He choked up even saying the words, forced the rest of his sentence out before his voice broke entirely. “I’m quitting the play.”

For a second, all that could be heard was the soft *clink* as Mr.

Danburry picked up his mug again. It felt like an eternity before the other man spoke up.

"Oh," he said, deliberately. Carefully. "That is… surprising, I'd heard you were quite enthusiastic— May I ask *why* you've changed your mind?"

Neil shook his head, trying to remember how he'd planned to unveil the whole affair to Ginny. "I— I didn't *want* to— It wasn't *my* choice."

"Then… whose choice *was* it?"

"My *father's*," Neil spat, surprised at the ruin of his own voice. He coughed, tried to recover some semblance of steadiness. "He— He would've never even allowed me to even attend *auditions*, if he'd known—"

"If he'd known?" the other man repeated.

Neil stopped, unsure of what he could safely say. "I— I never told him," he confessed. "He— He doesn't want me to do anything that could… *distract* me from my studies, no extra extracurriculars, *nothing*. So I… I didn't tell him about auditions, and then when I got the part… I couldn't give it up."

Neil glanced upwards, and really shouldn't have been surprised. Mr. Danburry was nodding along, as if Neil *wasn't* admitting to withholding information from a parental figure—at Neil's blank look of confusion, the man only responded with a slight—approving?—flattening of his bottom lip, motioning for Neil to continue.

“Well, I thought— I thought that it’d all go under his radar, all blow over eventually, if I managed to get perfect grades— Which I *did*.” Neil lowered one hand to his side, drumming his fingers on his leg as he looked over towards the fire again. “But— But that didn’t matter in the end… has Ginny told you about Mary?”

Mr. Danburry tilted his head. “Yes, yes… has she done something?”

Neil placed down his mug with a clatter, spilling a couple drops as he waved his hands. “No, no! She hasn’t done anything!” he sputtered out. “It’s— It’s just that her aunt happens to be neighbours with my parents…” he explained, reliving how his heart had dropped at hearing his father pronounce the name—*Mrs. Marks*, who’d only been trying to be friendly. “She… all she did was mention I was in the play, nothing wrong on her part. It was *who* she mentioned it to that was… that caused all this.”

“Your father,” Mr. Danburry finished. “And now… he wants you to withdraw from the play?”

“He’s *demanding* it,” Neil corrected. “I… I don’t have a choice.”

Mr. Danburry was silent for a moment, hand placed thoughtfully over his mouth. “Ginny’s… told me about rehearsals,” he offered. “She says that you’ve got quite the talent, that you always steal the spotlight.”

Neil felt the set of his posture soften, only slightly. “I— I mean, I’m passionate about it.”

“Very passionate, from what I hear,” the other man added, with a smile.

Neil found he couldn't even form the words to deny it. "I— Yeah, I am." He sighed, long and slow. "It just feels so… so *right*, like— Like I was *born* to do it. It's not— It's not a passing whim, like my father tries to tell me it is. When I'm up on that stage…" Neil trailed off, the awe that was pulling into his voice hardening back to resignation. "But none of that matters, now. I can't— I can't pursue that, can't live that life. Not when my father *forbids* it."

"That hardly seems fair," Mr. Danburry commented, forehead creasing.

"It's what I have to do, though," Neil muttered, sinking into the couch's pillowing. "My father, he— He always has his way. I'm— I'm *trapped*."

"Maybe so," Mr. Danburry agreed.

Which was, again, not what Neil had expected. He stopped, fixed in place where he'd been about to take another sip. "Aren't you… aren't you going to tell me that I should try talking to him? Telling him how I feel?"

"Have you?" the other man asked.

"No," Neil mumbled. "But— I can't. I can't talk to him, not like that." He gulped, setting his mug back down. "I don't… I don't come from a well-off family, like some other guys at Welton do. My father always tells me that it falls on *me* to make something of myself, that I have opportunities he couldn't *dream* of— And I— I see his point."

"One must make a living."

“But he’s planning the rest of my life for me!” Neil cried. “I— I’m sorry to say, but it wasn’t even *my* idea to take up Knox’s offer, to have dinner here. It was lovely, but I didn’t have a say in it.”

“Then I’m sorry to have been part of your father’s plan,” Mr. Danburry joked, before straightening out his face once more. “Neil, can I… can I be frank with you?” Neil nodded, falling backwards into the cushions. “I’m not… I’m not going to pretend that I know what’s happening with your father— You would know much better than I, I’m sure. But I do know *one* thing—” Mr. Danburry leant forward, as if he was sharing a secret. “Sometimes… sometimes, life just deals you a *shit* hand.”

Neil, taken by surprise, almost failed to smother the laughter that bubbled up his throat. Mr. Danburry didn’t seem to notice, carrying on regardless.

“It’s not fair. I won’t pretty it up— It’s not fair that you were born who you are, into the family you have. And yes, you may be… *trapped*, as you put it.” Mr. Danburry leant backwards again, resting a hand on the head of the couch. “But that doesn’t mean that it’s *over*.”

“How?” Neil argued. “I’ve been trapped all my life— Following *his* plan, getting good grades, becoming a doctor— I’ve never been allowed something *I* want, not like this. This is just… how it’s going to be, isn’t it?” Neil’s voice dropped to a whisper. “*Forever*.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because… I mean, it’s like a tragedy, isn’t it?” Neil declared. “It’s… It’s the way things have to be. Nothing will change. I’ll just be trapped, over and over, until I *die*. It’s…”

"…inevitable?" Mr. Danburry suggested.

"Exactly," Neil replied. "No matter what I do, it will end poorly. I just — I just can't help but feel as if it was all doomed from the start."

Neil took a moment to catch his breath, and the room fell quiet. It was Mr. Danburry, again, who broke the silence—not without a studious few beats of thought, however.

"Do you… do you know what separates a tragedy from a comedy, Neil?"

Neil blinked, once again burning his eyes on the sight of the fire. "A comedy is funny, farcical," he deadpanned. "A tragedy is depressing."

Mr. Danburry clicked his tongue again. "Come on, Neil," he spurred. "Ginny told me you had the entire script of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* memorised by the second rehearsal. You can do better than *that*."

Neil, though he didn't see the point, obliged—conjuring up the plays he'd studied, in English class or outside it. The English class *before* Mr. Keating had arrived to turn the entire curriculum upside down, flipped over its axis, swapped in its handedness.

He flicked his eyes, curiously, over to the bookshelves again—scanning his eyes over the tomes which inhabited them; there was the fair share of terribly mind-numbing titles Neil had seen before, but snuck between them was *something else*. A collection of *something else*'s, gold-embossed titles spelling out names more familiar and much more enticing to him. Mr. Danburry, as it turned out, had every single Shakespeare play stocked on the shelves, and Neil's eyes flitted over them in search of answers.

The comedy he knew best, *Twelfth Night*, gave him little to work with. It mostly consisted of a long series of misunderstandings and mistaken identities, strung along until all was resolved and the two shipwrecked twins were reunited. The other, though… *The Tempest* had a strange structure, beginning with tales of treachery and forced fleeing. And throughout the plot's runtime itself, there are plots of murder being spun, servants being chained to their masters, the bitter remains of lingering betrayal. And yet, by its conclusion, all of that had managed to be forgiven. It was a *comedy*.

And the tragedy Neil had studied only last year, *The Scottish Play* (as he'd been scolded into called it) was almost equally miserable from beginning to end as *Twelfth Night* was comical. The titular Scottish king's lust for power, driving him to regicide, pulling him into devilish plot after devilish plot, battle after battle. Yet, like comedies, there existed edge cases for tragedies too. Despite the foreordained deaths sung of by the chorus at the play's beginning, *Romeo and Juliet* was—at least for a non-insignificant portion of its runtime—seemingly a comedy. It's only after Mercutio is killed, calling a plague upon both houses, does it spiral into the realm of tragedy.

And there was, of course, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A comedy, ostensibly, and yet; had Neil not been considering, not so long ago, how poor the lover's situation had been before they entered the woods—made only *worse* once they did? Did Neil's fellow actors not have to strain their voices in order to convey the *pain*, the *hurt,* the *anguish* of their characters? Not to mention the hypothetical Neil had pondered—what *if* the charms were not able to be lifted from the four lovers? What if all of their love life's were perfectly, permanently despoiled, interfered with by the fairies such that no happy conclusion could be reached?

What if, after all that had happened, it *couldn't* be mended?

"It's the ending," Neil realised, aloud. He spun back to Mr. Danburry, who was watching with a sparkle in his eye. "The difference between

a tragedy and a comedy. It— It all depends on how it *ends*."

Mr. Danburry nodded. "It doesn't matter how the play begins, how it progresses. The ending can change the whole genre—on a *whim*."

"But— But we know the ending," Neil retorted, the hope that had caught in his chest quickly put out once more. "It's all written beforehand."

"Perhaps in a play," Mr. Danburry supplied. "But this is *life*, Neil. And I don't think you'll be trapped *forever*, just because it's how it's been so far."

Neil mulled it over. "But—"

Mr. Danburry cut him off. "Don't you think that you deserve a chance at it, Neil? At freedom?"

Neil paused. "I— I think everybody does," he answered.

"Then you need to *fight* for that!" Mr. Danburry *yawped*. "I'm sorry to say it— You shouldn't have to, Neil, it's unfair that you're forced to *fight* for what you want. But it is as it is."

"But I'm just—" Neil's voice became a breath, a soft, low exhale. "I'm so *tired*. I'm *tired* of fighting."

"I know," Mr. Danburry responded, tone gentler than it was before, easing forward in his seat. "I know. But one day it'll be over, and

you'll have your freedom. It could be next week, it could be years. But one day, you'll have it."

Neil raised the mug to his lips again, taking a swig of the warm tea, considering the other man's words. He'd been telling the truth, before —he was so, very exhausted with *fighting*, with believing that things would simply *work out*. Believing that if he simply tried one more time, extended himself just a little bit longer, that he'd finally have the shot at living his life in a way *he* wanted—

And *God*, he really *had* been dealt a shit hand, hadn't he?

It reminded Neil of another boy, quiet and keeping to himself somewhere on the other edge of town. *That* boy had gone through every layer of hell, had been shunned for almost his entire life by the people who were supposed to care about him—*worse* than shunned, he was taught he was worth less than the earth he walked on, that there was nothing of value within him besides the chemicals which made up his body.

Was Todd sick of fighting too? Did Todd simply want to keel over, refuse to commit to yet *another* song and dance, afraid that the ending would arrive and prove—once and for all—that it truly *was* a tragedy that he existed within? Neil wondered if *that* was why he'd pulled away as he did, after that society meeting, out on the bank of the forest brook. Was that why Neil had pulled away too, too afraid to give Todd the ending he feared was… *inevitable*?

Mr. Danburry's words rang through Neil's frame. The ending wasn't written, not *yet*, at least. So what did it matter how cruel the universe had been to them, thus far? There was still time, still empty pages lining the end of the book, waiting for words to be scratched upon them. All Neil had to do was put pencil lead to page, carve out his own ending.

All Neil had to do was *fight for it*.

Neil looked up, opened his mouth to speak, when he was interrupted by the noise of a car door thudding shut outside—a dull noise, followed by trills of giggling and the tapping of footsteps echoing up the pavers.

“Sounds like Ginny’s back,” Mr. Danburry declared, standing up out of his seat—gathering up his and Neil’s now empty mugs, staring down at the boy opposite him with fondness. “I hope you can give her the news that you want, alright?”

Barrelling over the last of his sentence, Neil heard the front door swinging open on its hinges—after which, in spilled the wintry cold and the sounds of a person shucking their coat, stepping into the living room.

“Ah, Ginny!” Mr. Danburry said as his daughter bundled in, still fiddling with her gloves as she removed them. “Neil’s here early— We were just having a chat, but I’ll leave you two to it, now.”

Ginny waved at Neil, who also stood, brushing himself off. “Thanks dad,” she said back, before gesturing towards the stairs to Neil. He began to follow her, but stopped just before the doorframe.

“Uh… *Joe*?” he called.

“Yes, Neil?” Mr. Danburry called back, popping his head back through from the entryway into the kitchen.

“Thank you,” Neil managed. “For— For the talk. And the tea.”

Mr. Danburry smiled. “Always a pleasure, Neil. Now go off, the both of you— You have a play to run lines for, yeah? I expect you to be the stars of the show on opening night.” Though directed at both of them, Neil could feel Mr. Danburry’s eyes lingering on him—a silent question.

“Don’t worry,” Neil promised. “We will.”

Ginny only rolled her eyes as she began to pick her way back into the hallway. “Alright, dad.”

Neil then turned, following her up the stairs. He made it as far as Ginny’s room, with Ginny still shaking snow off of her skirt, before she spun on him.

“So,” she drawled. “You’ve got something to tell me.”

Neil swallowed. “I… I do.”

“But most importantly… you’ve made your *decision*.” Ginny’s face, though windblown and frostbitten, still curved at its sides. Neil felt his heart begin to flutter against his ribcage.

“I— I have.”

“And…?” Ginny sat down on her bed, staring up at Neil. Expectantly. “Go on, tell me— What have you decided?”

Fight for it, Mr. Danburry had said. *You need to fight for it.*

Fight for him.

Neil shrugged off his satchel, went and sat beside Ginny on the bed.

And he told her his decision.

Chapter End Notes

Bad news: chapter was too large and had to split it
Good news: rest of the chapter next week :)
neutral news: new chapter count because of this change. Idk about y'all but personally incredibly annoyed it's no longer a clean 20. 21 is fine tho igggg :////////

also title chapter from sexy to someone

It's When You're Close Enough To Love

Chapter Summary

Neil, with the help of his friends, makes a long overdue excursion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was simple, in the end.

Neil skipped his way down the corridor, pulling on his duffel coat as he half-walked, half-ran through the empty hallway. The morning sun, spilling in through the many windows on his side, left puddles of brightly lit carpet that Neil splashed through; it was too early for staff to be patrolling, but even so, Neil didn't want to risk being caught speeding inside. The demerits wouldn't matter, but the time he lost apologising definitely would—so it was with an awkward gait that Neil reached Welton's double front doors, catching the attention of the boy leaning on the wall beside them.

"Took you long enough," Knox huffed, kicking off the wallpaper. "Thought for a minute that you were going to bail."

Neil shook his head, stuffing the square of notepaper clasped carefully between his fingers—folded through its centre twice, edges as clean as he could manage—into his breast pocket, checking to make sure there was no chance of it falling out.

"I wouldn't for the world," Neil assured the other boy, grinning.

"You have everything?" Knox fussed.

Neil nodded. He patted his breast pocket, which Knox had witnessed his use of. Neil flashed his wrist, around which was secured—once again—Meek's old watch (now *Neil's* watch, after Meeks was gifted a newer one for his birthday.) And finally, Neil reached beneath his coat into the inner pocket of his blazer, fumbling around until his fingers hit the crinkly wax paper. He angled himself forward, so that Knox could glimpse inside.

"I'm still amazed that you found some," Knox muttered, to which Neil chuckled—*he had his ways*. "Anyway, don't take too long, alright? I know you're not at *risk* of flunking Latin, but—"

"I know, I know," Neil butted in. "I'll make the test, don't worry. Any *more* checks you want to make?"

"Yes, actually," Knox answered, standing a little taller, backlit against the window. "Are you— Are you *sure*?"

And Neil couldn't help but grin—

"Of course I'm sure."

Ginny listed her head to one side, hazel curls falling out of place. "How sure?"

"I'm certain, Ginny," Neil assured her. "I couldn't be more certain about anything. He's worth it, worth anything."

Ginny righted the angle of her neck, stare boring into Neil as they both settled atop the peach-frilled bed. Neil waited a couple more anxious breaths, before Ginny's face split into a knowing smile.

“Well. I’m… I’m surprised, Neil,” she admitted.

“I’m surprised, too.”

“It’s just…” Ginny hesitated, bunching up the fabric of her sheets behind her. “I was so, so sure that night… That— That as soon as I asked you, you’d turn around— That you’d swear that I was wrong, making all the same empty promises. But… you didn’t.”

Neil nodded, thoughtful. “I wanted to,” he relented. “I really did want to. But… I needed time. To be sure. I— I didn’t want to make promises that I couldn’t keep.”

“That’s… impressive, of you, Neil,” Ginny hummed.

“Thank you…?”

“No, I mean it,” Ginny added. “The fact that you didn’t just blindly accept it, you wanted to consider it… I—” Ginny turned away, towards the bay window. “I trust him with you, you know.”

Neil’s heart did a little somersault, a subtle skip of a couple beats before it returned to its resting pace. “I won’t let you down. Or him, for that matter. I promise.”

Ginny glanced back, over her shoulder. “I know,” she said, eyes shining as her voice became breathy. “I know, Neil.” Then she stood up off of her mattress, walking towards her desk.

“What are you doing?” Neil queried.

Ginny simply continued to rummage around her drawers before eventually pulling out a notebook. Then she took the chair stood near the desk, spun it around to face Neil. “Well, we should get started then, right?”

“Started on what?”

Ginny tapped her nail on the cover of the notebook. “On figuring out how you’re going to do it*.”*

“You’ll help?” Neil blurted, relief flooding his voice—enough that Ginny laughed, pleasantly.

“Of course! To start, naturally, we’ll need—”

“—to get going,” Neil said, twisting open the doors of Welton, preparing to step out into the frozen morning. “Stay out of trouble while I’m gone, okay?”

“*You* stay out of trouble while *you’re* gone,” Knox quipped back, before his tone turned serious once more. “Good luck, Neil.”

Neil nodded his thanks, not wasting a second longer before practically sprinting his way out towards where the bikes were kept. As nimbly as he could, Neil unchained one, pulling it upright and spinning it in the direction of the path leading down to the road, to the gate. Then Neil kicked a leg over the seat, taking one last look at the brilliantly clear sky before digging his heels into the pedals. The wind picked up,

rushing past his ears, and the sound of the tyre's rubber against the road's asphalt whirred in the air. Welton disappeared behind him, and Neil was off.

Off, and almost taking the wrong turn once he'd descended the hill. He'd become so used to seeking out the Everett Theatre, every rehearsal day, that Neil had to wrestle with his muscle memory to be able to direct the handlebars onto the roads he wanted. Unfamiliar with his surroundings, Neil was forced to navigate by street signs and vague memories alone—it proved enough in the end, though, allowing him to reach his destination.

Veritable *parades* of students were already peeling out of all manners of vehicles once Neil arrived, all dressed up in mismatched winterwear and making for the open doors of Ridgway High School. Neil dismounted by the snow-carpeted football field, winding his way through the crowd into a hallway so unlike the one he'd been in before—boxed in, mobbed with throngs of people, and lined end-to-end with lockers.

Neil pushed past a couple puzzled-looking Ridgeway students (no doubt eying his incredibly obvious Welton uniform) as he put his head on a swivel, looking for a very specific someone to act as his docent. Looking for—

"Adam?" Neil asked, brow furrowing. "How are we going to start there? I can't— We can't tell him about—You know.*"*

Ginny held up her hands. "I never said we had to— And we won't, if you don't want to. But he does *know his way around the school better than I do. We could tell him…* some *things."*

Neil, mirroring Ginny, had pulled his own English notebook out of his satchel, had splayed it out on the mattress in front of him. He drummed his

fingers against the paper. “Like what?”

Ginny hummed in thought. “We could tell him that you’re… not on the best terms with Todd. And that you need to… apologise.” She kicked up her feet on a stool, a pencil having appeared in her hand. She set the lead of it to work in her notebook. “He’ll be happy to help, Neil, you know that.”

Neil collapsed backwards on the bed. “No, I know, he’s great, it’s just… I’ve got to be careful about this. All of it.”

Neil heard Ginny drop her feet back down, scooch the chair she was sitting on over towards the bed. Then he felt her hand on his knee, rubbing in soothing circles. “Don’t worry about it. We have an hour before he gets here— Same with Mary.”

“Mary’s coming?” Neil sat up, arms out behind him, propping him up.

“I invited her,” Ginny explained. “Difficult to rehearse with an odd amount of people, isn’t it? Although…” Ginny removed her hand, moved it to rest on her chin. “…she might be able to help, as well.”

“And… will we tell her the same stuff as Adam?” Neil asked, nerves creeping into his voice.

Ginny gave Neil’s kneecap a squeeze, a comforting pressure. “We’ll tell them whatever you’re comfortable with, Neil. It doesn’t have to be anything, if you don’t want it to be.” She removed her hand, scooched her chair back towards the desk.. “But remember— They’re your friends too. They’d want to help.”

Neil sighed. “You’re… You’re right. I don’t— Let’s just— Let’s just tell

them this*, okay…?"*

He jumped at the sudden voice in his ear.

"Adam!" Neil squeaked as he spun around, faced with the same broad chest and black hair he'd first met at auditions, so long ago now. "Sorry, what was that…?"

"I asked you if you were ready to get your Todd back," Adam laughed, throwing an arm around Neil's frame.

Neil felt his cheeks begin to burn, and he checked around to see if anyone had heard. If they had, they didn't show it, the students around him paying him little mind outside of a few confused stares. "As ready as I can be," he answered, quietly, before rearing his voice back to full volume. "Would love some direction around this place, though."

"Well then," Adam declared, grinning. "Let's get going."

And with that, Neil had little choice but to allow himself to be dragged along by the other boy's arm, still slung around his neck. Adam's previous experience on the football team was clearly coming in handy, allowing him to fight his way through the crowd as the two made their way down labyrinthine stretches of lockers and doorways.

"Mary get you what you needed?" Adam inquired.

Neil, even though he knew they were still there, checked his inner blazer pocket anyway. "Yep. No clue where she found them, but I have them."

“Perfect,” Adam said, as he almost collided with what looked to be a pair of cheerleaders. Both girls opened their mouths to protest, but stopped as soon as they saw who was uttering out excuses to them—recognising Adam, and seemingly not minding the look of Neil either. Adam politely told them both that they were in a rush, that they couldn’t chat now, and then continued onward. When they were out of earshot, Adam leant close to talk right in Neil’s ear. “You know, Nicole’s *never* like that when it’s only me. Guess you must be something special.”

Neil felt, abruptly, like the coat and blazer were a bit too much layering for him. “I’m not here for that,” he grumbled.

Adam only laughed again, continuing them on their way. “I’ve got it, don’t worry. You have your sights set on one boy and one boy only.”

The heat prickling all over Neil’s body grew worse, as well as the burning in his cheeks. Despite how he was talking, Adam really *didn’t* know the truth of why Neil was at Ridgeway today—or at least, Neil and Ginny hadn’t told him such on Sunday. When both he and Mary had sat down, they’d been filled in with an abridged, intentionally imprecise retelling of the events thus far; that Neil had upset Todd somehow, and needed to talk with him to right his wrongs. None of which was untrue, to Neil’s great dismay—but it did conveniently leave a lot of the additional feelings out of the details.

That, of course, had come after the *other* topic Neil had needed to fill everybody else in on—the *news* he’d told Ginny that he had.

“You can’t quit!” Ginny near screeched. “The play’s in a week, Neil and—no offence to your understudy—but nobody could take your place.”

“I don’t want to quit,” Neil reiterated, looking between the concerned stares of all three of his fellow actors. He tensed his fist on the bedsheets, mustering his determination. “And… I don’t plan to. But I need to figure out how to convince my father to let me stay.”

“Can’t you talk to him?” Adam proposed, now the occupant of the desk chair. “It’s your only option.”

Neil grimaced something awful, forced himself not to roll his eyes. “None of you have met him,” he ground out. “I’m— I’m never *going to convince him that acting isn’t anything more than a complete waste of time.”*

Adam frowned as beside him, leaning on the desk, Mary spoke up. “Maybe… you shouldn’t try and convince him of that,” she posited, gesticulating with her hands.

Neil pursed his lips, confused—though thoroughly relieved that it wasn’t another apology, which Mary had been offering over and over ever since she found out it was her *aunt that had informed Neil’s father. Something which, again, Neil didn’t blame any members of the Marks family for.*

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she elaborated, “if he’ll never be convinced of that*, then maybe he’ll believe something else. Something that appeals to him. Like—”*

“—lying?” Adam concluded.

Mary waved her hand around at the semantics of it all. “More like… reframing *it, I’d say.”*

Ginny, who'd been pacing across the length of her room for the past several minutes, suddenly ceased in her wearing down of the floorboards—twisting on her heel towards Neil. "That's it!" she exclaimed.

"What's it?" Neil asked.

Ginny gestured back at Mary. "Reframing it! Surely you can tell your father that dropping the play—last minute, without any warning—would be, I don't know… unprofessional?"

Neil scoffed. "Because he cares about professionalism in theatre? No, no, that wouldn't work…"

Ginny, however, shook her head stubbornly. "What about it reflecting poorly on your character? Cutting off future connections? Causing further embarrassment for your family?"

"What about promising your father that you're just getting it out of your system?" Adam piped up, wondering aloud as he peered out of the window. Ginny gasped, as Neil hung his head.

"I can't— I can't do that, Adam," Neil answered, sombrely. "I love acting — I don't want to give it up."

Adam rolled his head back towards Neil. "I didn't mean that you should actually *do that. I just meant to tell your father that, y'know— Make him an empty promise that'll get him off your back long enough to allow you to do the play." He flashed his teeth. "You know. Lying."*

Ginny turned back to Neil, chewing on her lips. "Could it work?"

"I'm… not sure." Neil thought back on his conversation with Mr. Danburry. "But… I have to try, don't I? Anything I can, right?"

"Right!" Adam agreed, heartily—so heartily that he almost scared Mary off of the desk, earning him a swat from the girl. Meanwhile, Ginny was staring down at Neil, face coloured with concern.

"You know we'll help all the way, right?"

Neil smiled up at her. "I know."

"And if that doesn't work," Ginny appended, "We'll— We'll smuggle you out of Welton, stow you away in the theatre."

Neil let out a bark of laughter, as behind Ginny Adam was defending himself against Mary's wrath at being spooked. He felt wound up like a spring, looking around the room. "I know, I know, Thanks, Ginny."

"Hey! It's not just Ginny!" Mary complained.

"Yeah," Adam agreed. "I mean, you're not the only one who's—"

"—happy to help, Neil, really!"

Neil pressed his lips shut, trying to keep the rest of his thank-you's from escaping. He was as bad as Mary had been on Sunday, not being

able to shut up now that they'd reached their destination—a *significantly* less populated block of Ridgeway, and the location of a very specific shortcut through the school. It was also where Adam needed to depart, something about meeting his other friends before class, leaving Neil at a door which apparently led to the kitchens.

"Just head through to the other side, and Ginny will be waiting outside the last door down. Won't be able to miss her."

Neil, begrudgingly, bit back *another* thank-you. "*Keen*. I'll see you around then, Adam."

"See you, Neil!"

Then Neil entered the Ridgeway kitchens, as per Adam's instructions.

Neil had been in the Welton kitchens only a few select times, most of those being to retrieve something for a teacher. He'd also only ever seen them in the downtime between meal preparations, had never taken the time to inspect them closely. So it was a shift, to say the least, to witness *Ridgeway's* kitchens; stuffed with heat, people, and noise, the air as rife with the clattering of pots and pans as it was with the mouthwatering smell of breakfast foods. Neil ignored the pang in his stomach—he'd skipped the meal this morning to be here this early—and focused on skittering past the cooks, all fortunately too busy to notice one boy in the wrong uniform skipping past their stations.

Neil manoeuvred his way around until he was faced with another door, very much like the one he'd used to enter the kitchens, which predictably led into another corridor—this one close to silent, a window at its far end from which golden light flowed. Silhouetted against the light was Ginny, who turned her head up at the noises of the kitchens unmuffling and muffling again with the swing of the door. She raised a finger to her curled lips immediately, making her

way towards Neil with delicate footsteps.

"You made it," she whispered, as if the moment were fragile—which, Neil considered, it might've been.

"I said I would, didn't I?" Neil answered, matching the volume, voice breathy from *everything*—the bike ride, traipsing about the layout of a foreign high school, preparing himself for what he knew was about to follow.

"I know," Ginny replied, sighing fondly, eyes crinkled with affection. "And you know what you're going to say, right?"

And Neil—

Neil had no clue what he could say. There was far too much to convey, too many thoughts, too many words—he couldn't possibly encompass everything within such limited time. Perhaps even with an eternity, he wouldn't be able to convey what he wanted, how he wanted to. It was another cliff edge he'd have to leap off, he supposed.

But not without a plan.

Over at the desk, Ginny and Adam were both debating over the two printout schedules laid before them—Mary doing her best to mediate between them. Adam was pointing out the gaps left in the afternoon, shared by both the timetables for Welton and Ridgeway; whereas, on the other hand, Ginny was set for the earlier hours, before class even started. Neil had been asked for his preference, but he'd decided to leave it up to the others—content to just sit back and weigh in on whatever conclusion was reached.

Besides, he needed time to figure out what—and how—he'd say what he needed to say. Adam and Mary, of course, assumed it would only be an apology. Ginny and Neil, however, knew how much more it was.

He tapped his pencil against the paper once more, English notebook flipped open to an empty page. The blankness of it felt mocking, a mimicry of his mind, of the impossible task laid before him; how could he possibly express to Todd the enormity of all he felt? All of the intricacies he considered, all of the weight that his words held? Neil picked at the edges of the pages idly, distracting himself by leafing through his previous notes—and his fingers caught on a gap, an awkward stop to his brainless fiddling. Neil pulled open the notebook, curious, and found—

Lines upon lines of torn-out margins, scattering shreds of pulp into the centrefold.

And Neil almost gasped with how obvious the solution was.

"Of course," Neil answered—and if he'd ever been as certain before as he was now, he couldn't recall the time.

"Don't let me keep you, then," Ginny said, beckoning Neil down the hallway. She directed him towards a door, simple and wooden, heavy set within the wall. Then she skirted around him, leaning on his shoulder. "Go on," she encouraged. "He's in there."

Neil stared. Raked a hand through his hair, checked his wristwatch once more. He had the better half of ten minutes—no, nine, now—before he would be at risk of incurring his Latin teacher's *ira* by missing the test. Neil welled in a deep breath, nodded once to Ginny, who nodded back.

Then, with a careful twist of his hand, turned the knob and opened

the door.

Then he stepped in.

It was like walking into a wall of silence, nothing but the clicking of hinges and dust motes populating the air—the classroom Neil was entering was near empty, desks and chairs all standing abandoned in the morning glow.

All, save for one.

He was hunched over the dusty wooden surface, poised with a novel in his hands, head lost within the book. His fingers traced over the leather cover as he moved to turn the page, the sound of paper sliding against skin sending gooseprickles up the back of Neil's neck. He had his bag slouching beside his seat, textbooks lying unopened on the corner of the desk, his study insofar untouched.

He was by the window, because *of course* he was. Light poured over the sill, dazzling and radiant, catching in his sandy-blonde hair—painting it a fuzzy gold at its ends, softening the locks where diffused shadows were cast upon them. The sun reflected in his irises, lost to the page before him, not even having flitted up at the noise of the door opening.

Instead, almost lazily—his voice an impossibly feathery drawl—he said, simply, "I'll get s-started in a *moment*, Ginny."

Neil felt as if he was walking atop seafoam. He didn't want to shatter the fragile scene before him, to interrupt the quiet rapture he'd found himself wrapped up in—he wanted, simply, to stay there, static in the doorframe, and watch the boy read by the window for however long he was allowed.

It was all so—

Perfect.

It was perfect.

Neil scanned the lines he had written out in his notebook, unfolding down the page like a tapestry. He let his eyes wander over them, smile creeping into the sides of his mouth. On the page opposite, it was a mess; words crossed out, their replacements pencilled in the margin beside. Entire sentences scribbled over, redirected to different points with hastily drawn arrows. It only barely fit together, a rough-sketch jigsaw puzzle.

But on the other page was the product of that uncouth, interpretative nightmare.

And it was perfect—neat, tidy, and perfect.

No, it wasn't much. But it would say what Neil needed it to say, how he needed it said. It would mean something, mean everything*, all without frightening the other boy away.*

Neil reached down to his satchel and scrounged around within its contents, eventually fetching out a ruler. He lined it up with the inner edge of the page and—carefully, this time, using a trick Cameron had taught him—Neil tore out the paper, the border trim and straight. Then he folded the square through its centre, twice, edges as clean as he could make them, before tucking it away in his breast pocket. Right over his heart.

“Neil?” Ginny called.

Neil turned to the trio, still crowded around Ginny’s desk. “Hm?”

“We have come to the conclusion,” Ginny announced, to which Adam coughed. She ignored him as she continued. “We think that it’s probably best to do it in the morning, sometime next week? Todd usually hides away in one of the spare classrooms, then, so…”

“You should have enough time to say your piece,” Mary supplied.

Neil let his eyes fall on Adam, who threw up his hands. “It’ll be a rush, but… if you’re quick getting there, and getting back, you’ll likely *make it to your morning class on time.”*

Neil nodded, keenly aware of the folded page in his pocket. “I can be quick.”

Ginny came over towards him, seating herself on her bed beside him. “I know you want to do this, Neil, but we can *wait until after the play if you want. There’s no deadline.”*

At that, Neil shook his head. “I’ve— We’ve *waited long enough, I think. I’ll do it next week.” He closed his notebook, looking between his friends. “What day, do you reckon?”*

“Wednesday,” Ginny and Mary both sang, in unison.

“Thursday,” Adam said, at the same time. Mary gave him another swat,

and he sighed, before grumbling, "Wednesday, then…"

Neil felt a chuckle spill from his lips—not at the playful bickering in particular. He just realised, all at once, how happy he was to be… here. *With that realisation dawned another; Neil* would *fight for his place here, as long as he could, no matter how long the battle would be.*

"Wednesday," he echoed. "Sounds—"

—beautiful.

The scene in front of Neil was beautiful. But, so too, was it never meant to last—and Neil, as he reprimanded himself, was on borrowed time.

He cleared his throat.

Todd looked up.

And *God*—

Neil had forgotten what a sight it was—what a sight *he* was. It slipped Neil's mind, for a moment, that he was supposed to continue speaking; his mouth was open, remained open, and yet nothing came out. Neil felt like he was on stage, struck by the spotlight, and he'd just drawn a blank on the next line in the script.

Todd dropped his book, a dull thud sounding out as it fell from his grasp. His eyes were blown wide, his mouth mirroring Neil's as his

jaw dropped.

Incredibly, Todd was the first to breach the silence stretching between them.

“N-Neil…?”

“Hey,” Neil took two steps forwards, thought it too much, took one step backward. He fidgeted with his hands, placed them in his pockets, pulled them back out.

“N-Neil, wh-what are you…?” Todd glanced around, hesitantly standing himself out of his chair. “Wh-What are you d-doing here?”

Neil shuffled his weight around from one foot to another. Ended up leaning against the desk in front of Todd’s, the sun beaming in from his right side. He swallowed.

“I came to see you.”

Todd froze, chewing on his lip as he looked to *his* left—out the window, the grounds of Ridgeway bathed in light. “N-Neil, you c-can’t…” he stuttered. “*We* c-can’t—”

Neil cut him off. “Todd, can you just— Can you just hear what I have to say, please?”

Todd cast his gaze downwards, and suddenly it was that first night all over again—Neil fumbling over the coattails of his own conversation,

Todd studying his shoes. But Neil knew, now, what he hadn't known back then; he knew what Todd was like when he allowed himself to *be*, when he pulled back the curtains he drew on himself. He knew how Todd acted when he believed, for a split second, in his own *worth*, when he wasn't so pushed over by the world.

Neil knew, also, he would do anything to see that side of him again.

"A-Alright," Todd muttered, close to a whisper. "I'm— I'm l-listening."

Neil breathed in, breathed out. The dust motes caught in the brilliance before him swirled, eddying with the rise and fall of his own chest. Neil tried desperately to recall the script he'd practiced, following the invisible beat of the play like he did at rehearsals.

But then he remembered that this was *life*.

He had no script, no written words he was ordained by fate to read out next.

He had a choice, a *freedom* to what he said.

And with that, the words came naturally.

"Do you remember when I let you look through my English notebook?"

Todd, focus still facing down, picked up his own dropped book and shut the covers closed. He nodded, curtly.

“Do you remember the torn-out pages? I— I promised I’d explain them to you, at some point.”

Todd looked up, face schooled—and yet eyes ringed with curiosity. Curiosity, and caution. “Is… *th-this*…” He gestured between them, whirlpooling the dust motes yet again. “…th-the explanation?”

Neil laughed, so soft, so light. “No,” he breathed. Then he reached into his breast pocket, unfolded the piece of paper—a quarter into a half, a half into a full square. “This is.”

And then he began to read aloud.

“Ginny?”

“Hm?”

Neil pulled the girl aside, leaving Mary and Adam to figure out the logistics of obtaining the ‘apology gift’ where they were sat on the floor. Neil had produced the page he’d torn out, writing peeking from between its creases. He pushed it into Ginny’s hands before he lost the nerve to do so.

“This is, uh— The plan I wrote out. It’s not really a plan*, per se, but…”*

“Ah!” Ginny cradled the paper with her fingers, gently, as if it were an autumn leaf she was handling. “Am I allowed to…?”

Neil waved her on, gulping. The nerves he felt were familiar, something out of a memory, but he waved her on regardless.

Ginny held the paper reverently, scanning her eyes over its contents with a considerate flick of her lashes. As she read, a grin slowly wormed its way onto her lips. By the time she removed her focus from the page, and moving her eyes back up to Neil, she was practically beaming.

"I know it's not the best," Neil prefaced. "But—"

"Neil," Ginny cut in, tenderly. "He'll love it."

She offered the paper back, and it took Neil a moment before he accepted it. He was oddly breathless, as if a great weight had been hefted off his shoulder. He took a small peek back at his own writing, at the—

—the poem.

The poem, which now, he read aloud.

"*With you,*

every smile's a secret.

A cupped fist closed 'round

the flame of a candle.

Let me pry them apart,

the fingers left blackened,

let me brush away the scald

of the flame.

Let me linger

in the light you burn

yourself hiding.

"And the beat of your laugh's

but a breath,

stuffed back in your throat,

as if it were ugly.

Let me revel in it.

Let yourself do the same,

let the song of it—

the song of wind, tracing over

freshly fallen snow—

let it be out and open

and shameless.

"With you,

every word's a whisper.

Weaved of a wit

you keep hidden

from the world.

I've witnessed it, now,

and have been left

wanting.

Wanting for it shouted,

for it yawp'd

over the rooftops,

the eaves.

Let us wake the world

with it, together.

"*All of you's hidden—*

let me see.

And let's both of us

be hidden, together."

Neil allowed himself to study the luminescence cast on the page in the golden light; delaying, as best he could, his inevitable glance upwards. When it came, he wasn't awfully shocked to see Todd staring down at the wood of the desk—he was only understanding, empathetic.

"Todd, I— I'm sorry for everything you went through." Neil watched as Todd's hands tensed against the tabletop. "I'm sorry for— For whatever part I may have contributed to. And every part I didn't. I know— I know you don't want sympathy."

Neil began fumbling about his blazer, checking his wristwatch with the movement.

He was running out of time.

“And I know this sort of thing… This sort of thing hasn’t worked out for you before. Not a lot, has, I think— And I… I get it. I get if you don’t want to try it again. If you don’t want to give the universe one more chance to… mess it all up again.”

Neil managed to snake a hand past the toggles of his duffel coat, the buttons of his blazer, into the wax paper lining his inner pocket. Out of it, he pulled the bundle that Mary had somehow secured for him—despite the dismal weather. Neil stepped forward, laying it—along with the square his poem was written on—onto the closed book Todd had left on the desk.

Todd stared at the purple-white flowers, wrapped in the twine and lying on the aged leather cover, as Neil continued.

“But I don’t think you should. I don’t think you should give up, Todd, because *I’m* not planning to. If you— If you want to, Todd, we can try it. We can give it a shot. And if you’re willing to…?” Neil strengthened his voice, lacing it with weight. “I promise, Todd, I’ll fight for you. For us. I promise that with everything I can give.”

Neil took three, careful steps back. Todd didn’t move, but Neil didn’t expect him to.

“You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted to tell you, to let you know I’ve… made my decision.”

Neil checked the time. He’d gone past his scheduled cutoff—he swiftly turned, made for door, spun back before he opened it.

“I’ll… I’ll see you around, hopefully.”

Then Neil swung open the door, falling back into the hallway—now all too conscious of the seconds peeling away on the face of his wrist. In the swing and click of the hinges, Neil swore he could almost hear Todd calling out his name, an urgent yelp and a scramble of shoes scuffing against the floor. Though Neil may have just been imagining it, told himself as much as he cut back through the kitchens—sneaking a slice of toast off a plate as he wound his way back through, giving the cook an apologetic nod as he did.

Then he was out on the other side, hopping his way back through the halls just like Adam had directed him before. Before he knew it (possibly due to the way his feet seemed to fly below him), Neil was back outside, mounting his bicycle, wrestling with the rusted kickstand before launching himself off of the pavement.

It was only there, rolling away from the high school, sunlight filtering through the grey, emptied trees—that Neil finally *breathed*. The air was cold, crisp, refreshing as it filled his lungs. The breath became a shallow laugh, which quickly snowballed into a deep, booming thing —made material as clouds of fog, trailing away from Neil as the scenery sped past him.

“I really don’t know why you’re laughing,” Ginny stated, tone dry.

“What?” Adam asked, sincerely trying—and failing—to cover the giggles slipping out of him.

“Come on, Ginny,” Mary tried, hiding her upturned mouth behind her hand, her expression betrayed by the quirk of her eyes. “It’s funny.”

Neil nodded along, as Ginny turned her eyes skyward. He wasn’t even sure what it had been that had set the three of them off; one minute they’d been wrapping up the last loose strings of the plan, poring over the dotted list Ginny had written out in her notebook. The next, Neil’s stomach was

hurting, Adam was halfway on the floor, and Mary was doing her best not to burst.

Whatever it had been, it had Ginny crossing her arms. "Have we at least *sorted everything out, now?"*

"Mm-hmm," Adam confirmed, fetching the aforementioned dotted list and reading out from it. "First of all, Neil—"

—pulled into Welton with a sharp turn, his legs exhausted and his breath ragged. Despite that, however, he couldn't help but smile as he bundled his bike away on the rack, cheeks hurting as he exploded into the hallway. His chest was light, his thoughts buzzing, and he skipped across the Welton carpet like he'd just won the lottery.

As planned, Knox was right by the door, two bags slung over his shoulder. When he looked up and saw Neil, he hurried over, pushed a satchel into Neil's hands, and then pulled him towards the classroom.

"Quick!" he whined. "We're going to be late!"

Neil floated along, happily accepting his satchel from Knox's outstretched hand. "You didn't have to wait," he replied.

"Of course I did." Knox looked backward, measuring Neil's face. "So, did you— Did you do it?"

Neil could only grin impossibly wider as he gave his answer. "I did."

“And…?”

“And what?”

“What did he say?”

“Oh. Nothing.” Neil shrugged as the two boys half-walked, half-ran down the hallway. “He said nothing.”

Knox spun on his heel. “What do you mean he said *nothing*?”

But Neil was already continuing on past him, tapping his wristwatch as he rushed towards the classroom. Knox had no choice but to chase him, calling out as he did.

“He had to have said *something*!” Knox insisted, tumbling over his sentence as he picked up his pace.

“Nope!” Neil sang back, giddily. “Nothing!” He reached the closed door of the Latin classroom, not even the dread of entering the already-started test wearing down Neil’s happiness. Knox came up behind him, fell forward, hands on his knees.

“If he said nothing,” Knox muttered, between puffs of breath, “why are you so happy?”

Neil grinned down at him. “Because I *did* it,” he said, simply.

“The gift, the plan, the time. Everything. All sorted,” Ginny trumpeted. Adam and Neil both broke into applause, while Mary patted her friend on the back.

“You think it’ll work?” Mary asked.

Ginny looked over at Neil, a slight worry wrinkling her brow. Adam and Mary followed her gaze, focuses needling into him.

“Who knows?” Neil rolled his shoulders, non-committal. Then, with a smile taking over his face, he added, “I’m still going to do it, though.”

And that was really it, wasn’t it?

Because in the end—

Because in the end?

In the end, it was simple.

“No, but really, Neil— What did he say?”

Meeks, leaning beside the boy, elbowed him in the side. “*Hell*,” he chided. “Give him some breathing room, Charlie.”

“What?” Charlie groused, doing his very best to appear relaxed as he lounged, once again, on Neil’s roommate’s bed. “Neil went to sleep last night before he could tell us, and dodged breakfast again this morning. I’m *looking out for my friend*.”

“Maybe there was a reason he did all that!” Meeks hissed, trying for subtlety—an utterly pointless endeavour considering how quiet it was in the room, *despite* the other five boys present.

“He’s fixing his tie, Meeks,” Charlie pointed out. “You think he’d be doing that if he *wasn’t* planning on performing today?” His voice, attempting a mocking lilt, came out more high-pitched than perhaps he’d been hoping for. That, along with the constant finger-tapping against the sheets that Neil could catch in his wardrobe mirror, told him that Charlie was wound-up.

Neil sighed, loosening the tie a little, allowing himself to breathe easier. Charlie was tense like a wire, that much was obvious—though Neil knew it had nothing to do with him wanting to hear about Neil’s phone call last night. Nothing to do with the phone call, but *everything* to do with the gentle-spoken, straight-haired boy sat in Neil’s desk chair, resting his head on his elbow as he watched out the window.

Cameron coughed. “So, uh… how *did* it go, Neil?”

Neil cast a glance over his shoulder and, despite his exhaustion from the task the night before, smiled widely. “Well. It went… well,” he answered, unable to help how happy he sounded saying the words. “As well as I could hope for, at least.”

And with that, the entire room seemed to let loose a collective, relieved breath.

“Thank *God*,” Pitts said from his corner, clinging to the radiator.

“Second to that,” Meeks concurred.

“What did I *tell* you—” Charlie began, smugness flooding into where the tightness was draining out of his voice.

“So he’s letting you do it?”

Charlie’s sentence was cut off with a strangled noise as Neil turned to Knox.

“He’s going to let you do the play?” Knox asked again.

Neil, practically brimming with elation, nodded. Knox seemed not quite to believe it, and Neil didn’t blame him—he could barely believe it himself. *His* father? Changing his mind? It was impossible, it was inconceivable, it—

It had gone as so.

It had been barely a week past Neil’s excursion out to Ridgeway High School, a little longer still since he’d made his decision in the living room of the Danburry home. He’d had sweaty palms for days, dry patches in his throat for nights, a weakness settling in his knees whenever he passed the passageway he *knew* he’d have to walk sooner or later.

He’d put it off until he knew he couldn’t put it off any longer. His

father had been away in Chicago for as long as Neil had been fretting over this, completely unaware that Neil had disobeyed him—had continued attending rehearsals, which had become more and more frequent as the night of the performance loomed closer and closer.

It had been the eve of Neil's debut as Puck, in Henley Hall's very own production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—last night, not even twelve hours before that very moment—when Neil had finally swallowed all his nerves, gathered as much courage as he could muster, and marched down to the student telephone. He'd almost broken, the long trills ringing out of the receiver into his ear, but he'd sunk his molars into the flesh of his cheek and hardened his resolve.

"*Hello? Who is this?*" his father had answered.

"*Father,*" Neil had replied, watching the bulb above the phone flicker in rhythm with the shaking of his hands.

"*Neil,*" his father said, just barely betraying an ounce of surprise. "*This better be important. I have a meeting tomorrow, early in the morning*."

"*It— It is,*" Neil had stuttered. He'd stopped, covered the transmitter with a palm, sucked in a cool rush of air between his teeth. Then he'd taken his hand off, and continued. "*I— I have something I should inform you of. S-Sir.*"

His father had a made a disapproving noise, made only slightly less disheartening by its staticky quality. "*Well. Get on with it, then*."

And Neil *had*.

Neil hadn't expected for it to work; he hadn't planned for the haphazard assortment of half-truths, none-truths, and vaguely-worded *concerns* for his and his family's *character* and *integrity* to elicit more than another lecture—a lecture only standing out among the rest of the *lectures* Neil had been subjected to by the novelty of being shouted over a wire. He'd expected he'd need to beg, promise, offer more than just *no more theatrics after this*.

But—

But *somehow*—

"*Fine,*" his father had ground out, sounding far too exhausted to continue his huffing.

"*F-Fine?*" Neil had echoed.

"Fine. *Perform your damn circus show. But know— I want to hear none of this, afterwards. Understood?*" His father's voice had crackled out of the blocky handset like a whip, but Neil had barely registered it.

"*Of course,*" he'd agreed, nodding—despite the fact that nobody was around to witness it.

"*Bah— It's not as if I will be attending, anyway,"* his father had carried on, grumbling more to himself than his son. "*I'm needed here for another week, at least.*"

And that, *somehow*, had been that. After a few warmthless farewells, Neil had returned the phone to its slot, heart jackrabbiting beneath his blazer. Because he'd done it. He'd *done* it. He'd practically danced his

way back to his room, so preoccupied with the herculean task he'd just conquered that he'd forgotten to inform the other poets of the development. He'd gone to bed smiling, had woken up smiling, and now—

Now, Neil was getting ready for the play that evening, humming under his breath as he fixed the collar of his shirt in the reflection.

The other poets all looked around in awe, finally able to let the excitement they'd tried to keep contained show through. They all turned, however, when Cameron—who'd made his to besides the door—cleared his throat.

"Sorry to interrupt," he announced. "But the rest of us *still have class* to attend."

"Right!" Pitts leapt off of the radiator, as the other poets scrambled up. All except for two; Charlie took his time, lazily picking himself up off of Neil's roommate's mattress, while Knox… Knox didn't move at all. After the other poets each took their leave (not before wishing Neil well, and assuring him they'd be in the audience tonight) there was a moment where it was only Charlie, Knox, and Neil left in the space.

Charlie cast his eyes towards Knox, now hunched back over in the chair. "Good luck, Neil," he said, not moving his eyes. "I'm— I'm glad your father came around."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say *that*," Neil replied, smile growing just a little taut at its edges. "But— But yeah. It's as best as I could hope for."

Charlie looked to Neil. Then, after a moment of deliberation, set a

hand on his shoulder, simper plastered on his face. “Looking forward to seeing you outshine the rest of the cast tonight.”

“I’m sure you’ll be the loudest bunch in the theatre,” Neil japed.

“Eh, I’ll try not to get us kicked out. *Maybe*.” Charlie winked, though his eyes didn’t hold the same sparkle as when he’d done it in the past. “See you, Neil.”

“See you, Charlie.”

With one last look cast over to Neil’s desk, Charlie nodded, saluted, and then scampered out of the room—leaving only Neil and Knox.

“You’re gonna be late,” Neil warned.

Knox pushed the chair back languidly, yawning. “It’s the Captain. You get better grades for being late.” He stood up out of his seat, stuck his hands in his pockets, studying Neil. His voice lowered as he continued. “Has he… have you heard anything yet? Anything back?”

Neil let out a long, drawn-out sigh. “No, Knox,” he said, for the however many’th time this week. “I… I haven’t heard *anything*. I haven’t seen… *him*… since that day. And Ginny hasn’t brought it up at any of the dress rehearsals.”

“And you’re… *alright* with that?” Knox asked, careful.

Neil wheeled back to the mirror, forcing his focus onto the tufts of his

hair. “Of course I am,” he answered, despite the kick in his stomach at the words. “I— I only wanted to tell him how I felt, Knox. I’m not… I’m not *owed* anything in return.”

Knox, walking up behind Neil, pushed his smile to the side of his face —making a crooked shape, flipped backwards by the reflection. “If you… If you say so.”

“I do,” Neil assured him, reaching to grab a comb off of his wardrobe shelf. He began peeling it through his fringe, attempting to flatten it to a workable level.

Meanwhile, Knox straightened himself, shuffling towards the door. “Well then… I’ll see you tonight, Neil. Good luck.”

Neil turned, flashed him a smile over his shoulder. “Thanks, Knox. I’ll … I’ll see you tonight.”

And with that, like the rest, Knox vanished into the hallway. Neil turned back to his mirror image, puffing out a breath which fogged on the glassy surface. Then he pulled the comb upwards once more, trying his best to shape the unruly licks of it into something that the stylist at the theatre wouldn’t reprimand him for. Neil wondered, idly, if Charlie had any of that horrid gel left—Neil wasn’t keen to have its slimy sensation back on his scalp, but it *would* take care of the strands sticking up on the back of his head. That, and it might provide a small distraction, dealing with the oozing feeling which made Neil’s skin crawl. Which Neil might’ve needed.

Because, well—

It wasn’t as if Neil had been *lying* to Knox, before.

He genuinely *had* only pedalled over to Ridgeway, following a plot cooked up by the collective minds of his fellow actor friends, to tell Todd he'd made his decision. He hadn't been expecting anything to come of it—at least, he hadn't allowed himself to *hope* that something would come of it. Not so soon, anyway. It was to be expected, really, that the other boy hadn't reached out for a *week*.

Still, it stung, a little.

One detail Neil had kept from Knox was that he had actually asked Ginny about it at dress rehearsals; a small, shy nudge, and then a whispered inquiry on if she'd heard anything from Todd. To which Ginny had simply grinned, informing Neil that she knew *absolutely nothing*—which Neil had taken in stride, digesting it with the patience he knew he should have.

But, as he reminded both Knox and himself, he wasn't owed *anything*.

All he could do was *wait*.

And that's what Neil did.

Once he was finished getting ready—hair now sitting relatively level, clothes without creases, tie secured around his neck—Neil was left nothing to do but wander about his room, aimlessly listing about. He would occasionally walk back to his wardrobe, open it again, check all of his features once more, just to be *certain*. Neil would readjust his tie, untuck his shirt only to tuck it back in, play with the placement of the badges on his blazer. He had nothing to do but *wait*, kick around, killing time.

Checking his newly acquired wristwatch, Neil saw that Dr. Hager wasn't due to collect him for another *hour*, at least. Neil threw himself onto his bed, messing up his hair and ironed clothes—not like he didn't have the time to fix it all, if and when required.

It was there, lying face down onto the pillow, when Neil heard the knock. He pulled his head up from the material, frowning. Checking his watch once more, he confirmed that it *couldn't* be Dr. Hager, no matter how punctual the man could be at times. Could it be one of the poets, or Neil's roommate, coming up to collect something they'd left behind? A quick survey of the room disproved that theory, as there were no bags or coats abandoned that Neil could spy.

Neil's pulse leapt to his throat as he considered that, just maybe, it was his *father* at the door, having driven all the way from Chicago just to meet him at Welton. To reveal that his complacency was all a ruse, to tear away all of the hope in Neil's chest and stomp it underfoot—yet again. Though the possibility was an unlikely one, Neil still shivered.

And he *jumped* when the knocking sounded out again, slightly more hesitant this time. Neil steadied his legs as he pulled himself off of the mattress, shaking off his stupor and superstitions, before heading towards the door; pushing down his hair as much as he could, pulling his tie a little snugger on his neck, brushing off the front of his now-wrinkled shirt.

Then he stepped over, and swung open the door.

And blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Three times, to make *sure* that he wasn't hallucinating.

Because at the door, within Welton's own halls, standing in the entryway to Neil's room—

Was a boy with sandy-blonde hair, powder blue eyes, and a hand extended out the front of him. He squirmed nervously on his feet, cheeks pinked from the wintry weather outside, and looked to be resisting the urge to stare down at his shoes. And yet still he pushed out his hand, offering it out to Neil who, too stunned to speak, only stood there.

A name fell from the other boy's lips, curling as if fighting a smile.

"Ch-Charlie Dalton, isn't it?"

Chapter End Notes

Title from "Second Nature". Let it be known that we are on the homestretch now people

I See Kismet Sinking In

Chapter Summary

> Neil and Todd finally get a moment to themselves to discuss... everything.

Chapter Notes

> Basically, how many possible callbacks can I make in ONE chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In Neil's defence.

This was the last scenario he'd expected to be faced with, opening his door that morning to find— To find *him*, who Neil could only describe as the prettiest boy he'd ever seen, standing amidst the peeling wallpaper and worn-down wainscoting.

So could he *really be* blamed?

If Neil stood there, mouth agape, for an embarrassing amount of seconds? A million questions pounding through his head, only one making it up and out of his throat—

"You— What—" Neil sputtered, as the other boy's smile twitched, hand still outstretched. "Todd, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," Todd answered, simply, assuredly. He wiggled his fingers, his other hand coming to rub at the back of his neck. "You kn-know, it's r-rude not to shake another person's hand."

Neil's mouth moved, forming words which never made it out into the air. His focus drifted back down to Todd's proffered palm—then back up to the boy's face, grin lopsided with poorly-concealed nerves—and then back to his hand. Todd watched him all the while, expecting, hesitant.

Neil couldn't help the way his face lit up as he moved his own hand out to meet Todd's, ringing the boy's wrist with his thumb and forefinger. Todd released a small, near-silent sigh of relief.

Which quickly broke into a yelp as Neil yanked him into the room, laughing as he twisted around to pull closed the door behind him. Todd almost tripped backward, spun around on his heel, but Neil still had his hand clasped in his—and so Todd had barely fallen before Neil caught him, helping him back upright, leaving their faces closer together than they'd been for weeks.

"Careful," Neil warned, tone giddy. Todd let out a breathless chuckle, one Neil could feel graze the tip of his nose. Suddenly sobering, Neil took a step back, tucking his hands behind him.

"S-So," Todd began.

"So," Neil echoed.

"I— Uh—" Todd stammered, face flushing as he turned around, taking in his surroundings. He traced his now free fingers along the back of Neil's chair, eyes exploring the space that Neil walked, worked, and *lived* in. "I've been thinking… about what you said."

Neil fought the urge to reach out, to move towards Todd, who was angling Neil's chair back until its two front legs left the ground. "… and?"

“W-Well,” Todd glanced over his shoulder, his smile clenched at its ends. “I’ve also b-been thinking about… l-last time. You know wh-what happened, d-don’t you? At B-Balincrest?”

Neil’s heart twisted, a shudder running up his spine. “I do.”

“So…”

“I get it, Todd,” Neil cut in, casting his eyes somewhere else—afraid they’d betray him, betray the downward turn of his tone. “I get that you wouldn’t want to risk it again—”

The clatter of Neil’s chair falling back onto all four feet interrupted the end of his sentence. “I don’t th-think you *do* get it, Neil.” Neil looked back and Todd was *there*, right in front of him, face firm.

Neil tried not to let the sight distract him. “Enlighten me…?” he asked, voice pinched.

Todd shook his head. “I was th-thinking about that t-time because… b-because…” He furrowed his brow, fighting to find the words, before letting out a shaky laugh. “G-God, I’m not as good at this as you w-were…”

“Hey, hey.” Neil, trying not to overstep, guided Todd over to his roommate’s bed. Todd was no Charlie, was unlike to strike up a cigarette he’d conjured from thin air—so Neil reckoned it was okay to borrow his roommate’s bedsprings. It also gave some distance between them as Neil hopped atop the radiator, perched beside the window. “Take all the time you need, Todd.”

Todd leant back, the frame creaking. He tapped his fingers on the wool of his jumper, deep in thought, and for a moment Neil thought the boy had given up on explaining entirely—though just as the idea crossed his mind, Todd spoke up.

"Th-That first night…" he said, staring down at the staccato beat of his drumming. "I— I didn't kn-know what to think, opening the door t-to you. A-And you kept trying to talk to me, it was as if— As if I was s-someone worth getting t-to know." Todd huffed in disbelief. "Then you t-told me to *stay*? T-Talked to me through dinner, returned my n-notebook to me?"

"Not before peeking inside," Neil added, dryly. "Like a nosy *prick*."

"Yes, that w-was… *embarrassing*." Todd hummed, looking up at the ceiling. "I was so *scared* h-hearing you'd looked through it. I… I thought you were making f-fun of me, when you tried telling m-me it was *brilliant*—"

Neil suddenly ran cold, despite the warmth of the metal he was resting atop of. "Todd, I would never—"

"I know," Todd interrupted. "And… d-despite everything… I w-wouldn't want it to have gone any other way."

Neil paused, sitting up slightly. "What?"

"B-Because then, at auditions," Todd continued. "I got to speak with you again. Not even t-ten seconds after sitting down, you apologised, and— And it w-wasn't even for what I thought you did!"

Neil slumped down at little, the heat of the radiator creeping up his face. “I— I felt bad.”

“A-And after that? W-Watching you up on stage, performing, and how you l-looked when you got your role?” Todd’s voice was lightly tinged with awe, and Neil couldn’t help how it made his chest flutter. “I th-think… that was the day I *knew*. That you w-were… something *else*.”

“That— That early?” Neil squeaked.

“And it only got w-worse after that,” Todd filled in, eyes crinkling with how he smiled. “I started seeing you, twice a w-week, after rehearsals— When you’d sneak me into the theatre lobby, afterwards.”

A memory came to Neil of Todd, face flushed and teeth chattering, protesting as he was pulled out of the bitter cold, and suddenly he was smiling too. “We didn’t *sneak you in*,” he corrected. “You were allowed to be in there— Welcome, even.”

“Even s-so,” Todd carried on. “It all g-got… *so much worse*, then. Suddenly, you weren’t j-just a— A *wonder* in the spotlight, a d-distant muse, you were…” Todd trailed off, abashed.

“I was what, Todd?” Neil queried, half-teasing, half-desperate for an answer.

“You were *there*,” Todd breathed, brimming with wonder. “*There*, r-right *there* in front of me, being s-so kind with your words, gentle with your actions, it was— It was rather p-pathetic.” Todd fiddled with the blankets folded next to him, the pink in his cheeks deepening. “I spent all week *waiting* for th-those rehearsal days. W-Waiting for those few,

precious minutes where— Where I c-c-could *s-see* you, *h-hear* y-you, and…" With his other hand, Todd covered his face, his next confession coming out mumbled. "Th-There was a t-time y-you r-rested your elbow on my sh-shoulder, and I— I c-couldn't *breathe* until th-the next morning."

Neil tried to recall that time and, strangely enough, found that he could remember it clear as spring-water. Adam had been telling both Neil and Todd a story—recounting the most recent shenaniganry of his younger siblings, who this time were steadfastly *refusing* to attend one of their relative's weddings on the basis of 'ickiness'—while Ginny and Mary were stuck amidst the gaggle of Henley girls also involved with the production.

Neil had been exhausted from a long day of writing his chemistry essay, preceded beforehand by a long *night* of *not* writing his chemistry essay, the weariness from both only further exacerbated by the rehearsal. He'd nestled his arm into the nook of Todd's neck subconsciously, too sleepy to feel any particular way besides content. He'd been terribly embarrassed about it later, blaming it on his sleep-deprived brain—and absolutely *not* thinking on how well he had fit, like a key into a lock.

"It w-was s-s-so *stupid*," Todd continued. "But you w-were always bright, and happy, and… *there*." He swallowed, hand stilling on the blankets, smile diminishing. "W-Well, until… until you *weren't*."

With a dull *clunk*, the radiator shut off beneath Neil, the faulty system giving out once more. "Todd…" he tried, only to be cut off again.

"D-Don't apologise, Neil, I get it, I—"

"No," Neil interrupted back. He swung his legs off of the cooling metal, bringing himself to his feet.

“No…?” Todd said, his head listing ever-so-slightly to the left. “Wh-What do you m-mean, no?”

“No,” Neil repeated. He positioned his arm on the corner of wall poking out beside the window frame, leaning his forehead against it as he looked down at the other boy. “That was… that was *poor* of me, Todd, very poor of me. I’d just— I’d just *thought*— Todd, I didn’t know what I thought. I didn’t… I didn’t know what I was going through, like you did. I couldn’t name it, like you could, but it… It drove me *crazy* all the same.”

Todd let out a small laugh, which Neil mirrored—though a grimmer expression soon slotted onto his features.

“And I was— I was scared of what that meant. I thought that this— This *thing* I had with Ginny, that *that* was what I wanted. I thought that I was getting distracted from that, or… or *something*.” Neil closed his eyelids as he let his head fall into the bend of his elbow. “I obviously didn’t… I didn’t know what had happened to you, then, but even still. It was terrible of me to do, regardless. I’m sorry. I feel *awful* about it.”

“But you *shouldn’t*.” The springs of the mattress groaned, and when Neil opened his eyes, Todd was sitting up on the bed. He stared determinedly up at Neil as he went on. “You *more* than made up for that, Neil, b-because… Because you helped me when I n-needed it *most*. On my— On my *birthday*.”

Neil exhaled through his teeth as Todd shrank within himself, looking elsewhere as he wrapped his arms around his torso.

“I was s-so… So *lost*. When I got my… My *gift*, I wasn’t even upset. It

felt like a joke, like it couldn't b-be real— But it *was*, th-there in my hands, and I just… I just had to *l-leave*, to g-get out of the house. I was under that bridge wh-when it hit me." Todd brought up his knees to his chest, shoes balanced on the edge of the bedframe. "I c-couldn't bare to *look* at it anymore. So I st-stood up, left for the only place I could think of—"

"The theatre," Neil finished, and Todd nodded. "But Ginny had gone home early. It was… It was only me there."

Todd whipped his head up sharply. "It w-wasn't only *you*, Neil," he uttered, tone fierce, defiant. "It was you, and y-your— Your *inexorable* ability to t-take something, and flip it on its head." Todd set his feet back on the floorboards, his posture gentling, tension bleeding out of him. "You took a gift I couldn't *stomach* looking at, and m-made it priceless. You took a day I thought w-would h-haunt me, and made it a moment I'd treasure forever." Todd smiled, soft, like snow. "You took a b-boy who thought he wasn't worth *anything*, made him f-feel as if he was worth… *something*."

Behind Neil, the radiator let out another dull *clunk*—signalling it was working once more, as Neil gulped. "I'm— I'm *glad*."

"Then… you invited me to your *meeting*."

Neil frowned as he fell back onto the radiator. "*The* meeting."

"In tr-truth, I wouldn't have gone if Ginny hadn't insisted," Todd admitted. "But n-not because I didn't want to go. I j-just thought I'd be intruding, that I wouldn't f-fit, that it'd be *awkward*— Y-You changed that too, you know."

"I mean," Neil grimaced. "It *was* awkward, at the beginning."

“M-Maybe,” Todd mumbled. “But you pulled me through it. Towards the end, I— I f-felt as if I *belonged*, like—”

“You were a piece that was missing.”

Todd peered over at Neil, grin bashful. “W-Well, I w-wouldn’t— I have a p-place at Ridgeway, in the end, but it *w-was*… a glimpse at what could’ve been. What still could be.”

Neil, glancing over at Todd, considered it. Despite how jarring it had been to see Todd appear in Welton’s own halls, at the door of Neil’s dorm, he did look… strangely *perfect* amidst its furnishings. Neil could easily imagine him laid out on the bed like he was now, only in a blazer and collar and tie, pencil scratching poetry into his notebook on a random afternoon. The illusion of it came like a dream, passed like a hope—the illusion of what might’ve been, in some other life; Neil imagined shared nocturnal writing sessions, long study blocks with the group one member larger, lazy days spent lounging on the grassy bay of the lake. Of meetings out in the cave at night, following the moon’s reflection in the shadowed brook as they ran between the trees, hollering out into the darkness with not an iota of fear in their bones—

“But the meeting… it didn’t turn out well, did it?” Neil asked, tone turning sour as he kicked at the dusty floor.

“Maybe n-not,” Todd mused. “That night, I was… *reminded* of s-some things, and it… w-wasn’t pleasant, I might add.”

Neil recollected how quickly he’d shot up at Knox’s voice, away from the other boy. How he’d avoided eye contact following the interruption, marched himself away form his own messy mistake in

view of the waxing moon and its waxing mirror. He winced.

"I w-was… I was ready to give up. I didn't blame you, Neil, but I d-didn't… I didn't want to go through all of that again."

Neil nodded. He could only nod, as much as he wanted to do anything else; offer comfort, spew out apologies, *beg* for it all to be different.

"So I r-ran off, which— Which wasn't fair to you. But I was scared to s-see you, for us to be… *us*." Todd leant backwards, his arms outstretched behind him. "I thought it'd be better. Easier."

"You needed some space."

"I— I th-thought I did."

"And… was it better?"

Todd let out a long, low breath. "No," he finally answered. "B-But I'd already t-told you to forget it, to n-not talk about it… I th-thought that was it."

Neil was reminded of the sound of pipes in the Danburry kitchen, of the scald of the sinkwater, the rough of the dishcloth. He flexed his hand, almost out of habit. "As if I could forget it, Todd. I— I tried. But that, I think… That was when I couldn't deny it any longer. I— I made the connection not long after that. Finally had some realisations on how I felt. I… I got there, in the end."

“Wh-Whereas *I* was busy getting st-stuck in the past,” Todd muttered. “I tried to make it all mean n-nothing. Told myself it w-would only end badly, that I was retreading o-old ground.” He looked up, meeting Neil’s gaze. “I d-don’t… I don’t *want* to relive th-that experience, Neil.”

Neil’s mouth went dry, his tongue heavy, tear ducts pricking. *This was it.* “Okay,” he replied, quietly, speech wavering. “I won’t— Thanks for telling me, Todd.”

Todd, oddly enough, barked out a laugh. “Neil, you r-really d-don’t get it, do you?”

“What don’t I get?”

“Neil,” Todd said. “I don’t want to r-relive *that* experience. When we— *If* we try th-this… I don’t want it be something else, something I’ve already done. I d-don’t want you to have to— To *m-make up* for the past, Neil.” He smiled so wide, so wonderfully, and Neil felt his pulse somersaulting in his ears. “I w-want to try for something new, s-something *better*.”

“You… You want to try?” Neil asked, a lilt to his question, a hope he didn’t dare believe. “With me?”

Todd laughed again, and all Neil could think—despite the flurry of thoughts, racing through his mind—was that he’d nailed the description in his poem. The sound was a cool breeze, tracing across the white bed of a newly-snowed wintry scene, and Neil wished he could bottle it.

“You don’t think I came all this way because I wanted y-you to leave me *alone*, d-did you?”

“But—” Neil pushed himself off of the radiator, the *all* of him suddenly too hot. Todd brought himself to his feet, also, meeting Neil halfway. “You said you thought that it would… That it would all end like it had before, like at Balincrest— What changed your mind?”

Todd took a step forward. “You,” he answered.

“Me?”

“I was s-so… So *buried* in the past,” Todd explained. “I didn’t think about what— What could be, I only thought about what *w-was*. And then… Then, you b-burst into that unused classroom I was hiding in.” He took another step forward. “So ready to t-try, to… To *fight*, and I realised something. Maybe I c-could be happy, or, at least… I’d never know unless I went for it.”

“Is this…” Neil gestured to what little length remained between them. “…you going for it?”

Todd took one, final step forward, crowding into Neil’s space. “As best as I c-can.”

Neil pulled back an inch, finding himself against the wall. “Well,” he whispered. “I— I said I’d fight for you, if you were willing…”

“And I am,” Todd responded, voice also a whisper.

“And you are.” Neil felt a grin tugging at his face, didn’t bother to try and rebuff it any longer. “I guess that only leaves one thing.”

“And that is…?”

Neil unstuck himself from the wall, skirting around Todd, picking his way into the centre of the room. He beckoned the other, now utterly confused boy over, then held out his hand—raising the other in a scout’s salute.

“I, Neil Perry,” he pledged, “do solemnly vow—Dead Poet’s honour—to fight for you, Todd Anderson, for as long as you’ll have me.”

Todd giggled, impossibly fond. With as much elegance as he could garner, he took Neil’s hand in his. “And I, Todd Anderson, vow the same to you.” Then he yanked Neil forward suddenly by the wrist, making him almost trip on his own feet, stumbling his way into holding onto Todd’s shoulder for support.

“I deserved that,” Neil laughed, right into the shell of Todd’s ear. He felt a kick of satisfaction when he felt the other boy shiver beneath his jumper. When he righted himself—one hand still nested on Todd’s shoulder, the other snaking up the boy’s arm—he stared into Todd’s powder blue eyes, half-shut with how much he was beaming. “All that time we wasted,” he lamented. “We’re horrible, aren’t we?”

“The worst,” Todd affirmed, cheerfully. Where they were stood, light from the window filtered in and shone between them; with brilliance caught in their shared breaths, Neil’s eyes dipped down, once, to Todd’s lips. He caught Todd doing the same to his and, feeling as if he’d waited long enough, finally—and slowly—leant forward.

Only to be interrupted by several sharp knocks at the door.

“Shit!” Neil cursed, under his breath. “That’ll be Dr. Hager.”

“Dr. Hager?”

“He’s supposed to be driving me down to the theatre…” Neil craned his neck to check his watch. “…soon.”

“Oh…” Todd murmured, face falling—only for it to light right back up, not a second later. “Oh, *oh*! That’s right!”

“What’s right?”

Todd ducked his head, grinning sheepishly. “I w-was actually supposed to t-tell you *before,* but we got… *distracted*.”

“Tell me what, Todd?”

“I actually g-got driven here by Chet— He’s driving Ginny and Adam to the d-dress rehearsal this morning, and he agreed to p-pick you up as well.”

“Neil?” came Dr. Hager’s voice, dry and muffled through the wood.

“Wait—” Neil scratched at his temple, flicking his focus over to the door. “Are you sure?”

Todd’s hands began to gather in front of his jumper, picking at his own cuticles as he nodded. Neil glanced between him, and the door.

“Alright.”

Then, before Todd could damage the skin any further, Neil detached his hands from the other boy’s shoulder and arm and brought them down, lacing Todd’s fingers with his own. He held them still as he pulled the boy along towards the door, opening it only a sliver, barely enough for him to poke his head through—leaving Todd perfectly hidden from the view of the hallway. The whole time, he kept the other boy’s palm clasped in his, disguising it as him supporting himself against the frame.

“Ah, Mr. Perry,” Dr. Hager began. “I was worried—”

“Dr. Hager,” Neil blurted, trying to speak over the din his heartbeat was making in his ears. “Sorry, I was… still getting dressed.”

Dr. Hager waved his hand, dismissively. “No worries. Will you be ready to depart, in time?”

“Well…” Neil felt the hand in his tug, as the attached boy tried to wriggle further away. Neil tugged back, gently, keeping Todd firmly by his side. “…about that. I was actually about to update you on that.”

“How so?”

Neil gave Todd’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “A friend of mine—from the production—has actually offered to deliver me to the dress rehearsal.”

“Is that so?” Dr. Hager raised an eyebrow. “Is this the same *friend* you… shared a bicycle with, that night before?”

Neil tried to stifle his reaction as the grip on his hand tightened in alarm. “No, no, this is different,” he clarified. “I— I just thought it might be more convenient to you, so you don’t risk missing your class afterwards.”

“That’s very considerate, Mr. Perry,” Dr. Hager droned. “However, are you… *certain* that you will not be better off being escorted by Welton’s staff?”

Neil flashed his signature smile, the one which charmed every authority figure he used it upon. “I’m certain. No need to worry, really.”

Dr. Hager looked Neil up and down, curious, but ultimately accepted the alteration to the schedule. After ensuring, of course, that Neil understood that *if* this arrangement fell out (something Todd tapped Neil’s wrist at the mention of, making it so Neil had to wrangle his face away from a laugh), he would be forced to find his own means of travel. Neil assured him he was aware, and with that, Dr. Hager *finally* wandered back to his office—not before giving Neil a funny look, though.

“One more thing, Mr. Perry, if I may…”

“What’s the matter, sir?”

“I— Forgive me for my assumption, but as I was walking up, I swear I could hear… *two* voices in your room?”

Neil immediately felt Todd's reaction, his digits tensing up where they were interlocked with Neil's. The boy, not for the first time, tried yet again to slink away, but Neil held on fast as he plastered on a confused but friendly demeanour.

"I— I *was* running lines by myself, before, sir," he explained. "I might've been putting on different voices, I don't remember… perhaps that was it?"

Dr. Hager readjusted where his glasses sat on the bridge of his nose. "Yes, yes," he replied. "That must've been it. Best of luck tonight, Mr. Perry."

Neil felt himself deflating in relief. "Thank you, sir."

And with that, Dr. Hager turned and left—Neil made sure the reverberations of his footsteps had wholly disappeared down the corner at the hallway's end before he slipped the door closed, turning to lock eyes with the boy next to him. They stared at each other in silence, waiting for the other to break.

They broke together, lasting two seconds in total, collapsing into laughter. Todd folded in half with his cackling, while Neil found himself sprawled out on the floor.

"You t-told him about the *bike ride*?" Todd inquired, tears in his eyes.

"I didn't mention the details!" Neil defended. "And were you *trying* to tickle my wrist?"

"I was *trying* to get you to let me go!"

Neil flashed his teeth as Todd extended his arm down, helping him to his feet. “Never,” he said, grinning like the devil. Then he brushed himself off with his free hand. “So… Chet drove you here, did he?”

“Yes,” Todd confirmed. “Is that… Is that alright?”

Neil let the gears turn in his head, thinking on what this meant. “Better than alright, actually— Say, how long do you reckon we have before we *need* to leave?”

Todd shrugged. “Chet was given the day off, everybody else has an h-hour until the rehearsal…”

“And you, Todd?”

“I’m… I’m not exactly s-supposed to be *here*,” Todd sputtered, looking away. “But I’ll hang around. I *w-want* to hang around.”

“Fantastic,” Neil said, beginning to gather his things from around the room. “Because class ends soon, and we’ve got just enough time to pull my idea off.”

“Your idea?” Todd asked, intrigue creeping into his voice.

“Yep,” Neil responded, throwing his satchel over his shoulder. Then he opened his door once more, swivelling his head, checking both directions. The coast was clear. “But we’ve got to hurry if we want to get Ginny and that in on it.”

“What are you going to do?” Todd was smiling, dazed almost, as he followed Neil out, and down the stairs. Neil could relate to the feeling.

“I think some introductions are long overdue,” was all he said back. “Or, well… *reintroductions*.”

Insane.

That was the only way to describe it—the feeling kicking around in Neil’s stomach, the feeling he was being driven to. He’d never realised, before, just what it was like; to look, and to be *allowed* to look, *allowed* to take and take and take however much he wanted. Without needing to shirk his view, hide away his gaze, shrivel away due to the shame of it all.

It went straight to his chest, a swirling, celebratory feeling, spinning across the strings of his heart as he watched Todd explain the layout of the Welton grounds to Adam. It was shoddy, inaccurate, based off of a patchwork memory of a handful of visits and a long-repressed tour—but Adam was all the same enraptured by it, peering into the trophy case beside him as if it were a museum display.

Speaking of museum displays, Neil thought to himself, as Todd pointed out the faded-brown pictures of graduating classes past. The light streaming through the window at the stairwell’s top lit Todd like a spotlight did an actor, throwing golden rays over his mirthful expression, highlighting the near-invisible knit of his brow. It felt like Neil was looking at a moving piece of artwork—one which would occasionally turn to see him looking, begin stuttering over his words, have his face flush a little, before continuing.

As stated before, it was driving Neil insane.

"So how'd it go?"

Neil startled at the voice, though relaxed as soon as he saw whose it was. "How'd what go, Ginny?" he crooned. Subtly, he checked down the hallway, puzzling over what the Captain could've possibly cooked up for a lesson to last five minutes after class was supposed to end.

Ginny, knowingly, nudged her head in the direction of the other two boys in the room. "He told me what he was going to do," she revealed. "I take it from your gleeful face it went well?"

"Better than well," Neil filled in, unadulterated joy dripping from each word.

"I'm glad." Ginny, eschewing Neil's subtle approach, deliberately tipped her head forward to glance down the corridor. "You're sure that your friends will take this route? The bell sounded a bit ago."

"They'll be here," Neil assured her. "Our English class tends to… play *loosely* with conventions. I guess that includes the timetable, now."

Ginny was about to reply when they were interrupted by an exclamation from the other side of the entrance.

"Hey, Todd, is this your brother?"

Neil immediately rigidified on the spot, as did Ginny beside him. Both

turned to see where Adam was pointing to a gleaming certificate, pinned to the wall behind the glass of the case, bearing a certain surname inked in looping letters. Neil opened his mouth to cut Adam off when—

Todd *laughed*. “Yep, I s-suspect you’ll see him quite a bit in that display.”

“Huh,” Adam said, as Neil and Ginny exchanged puzzled—if not pleasantly surprised—looks. “Cool. I didn’t know you had a brother.”

Then Adam spun back to glancing around the other trophies, and Todd continued explaining how a *rowing* tournament worked.

“That’s new,” Ginny commented, grinning. “I don’t know what you did to him, Neil, but *I* was never able to have him waving aside a mention of his brother.”

Neil thought back to when he’d first met Todd, that night at the Danburry’s—how Todd had shut off completely when Neil had brought up the name *Jeffrey Anderson*. “Maybe… Maybe he’s just… *Too* happy to care about any of that, at the moment,” Neil reasoned.

“Speaking from experience, are you?” Ginny teased.

Neil was saved from having to respond as, with the grace of a herd of elephants, a herd of *Welton upperclassmen* stormed down the hallway —feet stomping, mouths chattering, and faces sending strange looks over at the very obvious outsiders inhabiting the entryway. Only five, however, broke from the mass of boys, wandering over just as Neil had hoped they would.

“Neil,” Charlie called out as he approached. “What are you still doing here?”

“Ginny’s offered to give me a lift,” Neil explained, as the rest of the poets began to gather around. Todd and Adam soon joined them as well, as the other students filtered out to their respective second periods. “So I was able to stay just a little longer— Thought it was about time you guys met each other.”

As Neil began to introduce his old group of friends to those more recently acquired, the poets and actors alike each nodded in greeting, trading names and swapping formalities. Afterwards, the other poets turned to Todd, welcoming him as if they’d known him all year—he received a slap on the back from Pitts, and a handshake from Cameron which was *much* less formal than last time.

When it was Charlie’s turn to meet the two newcomers, he bowed. “How do you do?” he sang to Ginny, as he took her hand and kissed her ring. She and Neil laughed as he did, doubly so when he turned and did the exact same to Adam. Adam, for his credit, didn’t call attention to the behaviour—instead launching right into a series of questions on events Neil had told him about, some of which he wasn’t sure were true or not.

Knox, Neil couldn’t help but notice, hung back through all of this. Neil caught his eyes flick over when Charlie introduced himself to Ginny in the manner he did, caught him flinch when Charlie brought her hand to his lips. Caught his entire body clench, his face clouding over, seeing the same treatment being afforded to Adam. As Knox politely (if limply) shook Ginny’s hand, doing his best to conceal the dourness in his irises, he watched Charlie enthusiastically answer Adam’s questions—confirming that yes, they *had* stolen a teacher’s bottle of brandy once, and yes, they *had* tossed it into the lake out of fear of being caught.

Knox didn’t bother trying to interject into the conversation to

introduce himself to Adam. Instead he slunk off, making for the back of the crowd, hiding himself in a corner where he could glare at the boy with black hair and a broad chest. Ginny excused herself before going over to Todd, who'd only asked for an update on Pitts and Meeks' hi-fi system—and was now on the receiving end of a very thorough breakdown of the wiring issues the two had encountered, with Cameron supervising to translate their lecture into layman's terms.

Neil shuffled over to Knox's corner, observing as the boy's mood quickly worsened with every subsequent guffaw sounding from Adam and Charlie's colloquy. Keeping his voice low so that no one else could hear them, Neil whispered to him. "Jealousy."

Knox wheeled on him, thrown off-guard—apparently, he'd been so solely focused on Charlie and Adam that he hadn't even *noticed* Neil come up beside him. "What?"

"It… looks like jealousy, to me." Neil nodded over towards where Adam and Charlie were conversing, *disgustingly* amicably, before gesturing in circles in front of his expression. "On your face."

Knox shook his head. "It's not— *I'm* not—" He let out a frustrated scoff, giving up on keeping his eyes anywhere but set on the pair.

Adam was swiftly moving through *every* ridiculous story Neil had retold, discerning which were truth and which were myth. Charlie, ever dutiful, was playing his part perfectly—that is, he was assuring Adam that *every* story was true, the reality of the situation notwithstanding.

"*Whatever*. Charlie treats *everybody* like that."

Neil clicked his tongue. “Does Charlie get along with *everybody* after only having exchanged a couple dozen words with them?” he poked.

Knox crossed his arms, the storm in the set of his jaw thundering as he grit his teeth—and Neil decided that maybe it was time to quit with the teasing.

“I wouldn’t worry,” he instructed the other boy, patting him on the back of his blazer. “Just give it a minute. You’ll see.”

Knox squinted at Neil, suspicious. “What do you mean by that—”

With impeccable timing, as well as a whole lot of brute force, Welton’s double doors were violently thrown open—interrupting every single conversation in the entryway, forcing each head to pivot towards where the cold weather outside now blew over them.

“What’s taking you guys so *long*?”

Neil could *feel* Knox freeze beside him. The only sign that the boy hadn’t become a statue was the way his fists went white-knuckled at his sides, the way every muscle in his cheeks went as taut as a bowstring. The other poets all looked between each other in shock, while Adam tilted his head to the side. Todd hid his face, whereas Ginny only rolled her eyes.

“We were just meeting Neil’s friends, *Chet*. We’ll be out in a bit,” she drawled.

The side of Chet’s mouth gnarled something wicked. “How long could it possibly take to meet a bunch of Welton losers? Surely you’re done

now, come on."

Meeks, Pitts, and Cameron began whispering amongst themselves, while Charlie disclosed something in Adam's ear which the boy, very earnestly, was attempting not to burst out laughing at. Next to Neil, Knox hadn't moved at all.

"*Fine*," Ginny relented, sighing. She turned to each of the poets, waving politely. "It was lovely to meet you all!"

"Yeah, yeah, say your goodbyes," Chet sneered. He began glaring disinterestedly at all of them, boredly casting his gaze around the room—until, in a second which stretched longer than Neil thought possible, it landed on the spot of carpet to which Knox was rooted. Out of the corner of his eye, Neil saw as Knox jumped, as at the same time a smirk wormed its way onto Chet's face.

"Overstreet!"

Knox seemed as if he wanted to melt away, sink into his shoes and disappear. Chet strolled right across the room, the biting chill still spilling in from behind him. He stopped a little too close to him and Neil, pitched a little too far forward.

"How have you been, ghost boy?"

Ginny's steps tapped sharply on the floor as she strutted up to her brother's side, clearing the distance as quick as she could. "Chet, leave him alone—"

"*Come on*, we're just catching up," Chet retorted. "I want to know how

he's been doing all this time." He swatted away his sister's attempts to pull him back, staring down Knox with beady eyes and a grin like a shark—Knox, Neil noticed, was shaking. "I want to know if he's still so scared that he—"

"Chet!" Ginny hissed, as another set of footsteps resounded around the entryway like hammer on steel.

"—still cries himself to sleep like a baby—"

Chet was cut off as a sharp shove hit his chest, forcing him to stumble back. Charlie, face tinged the lightest shade of red, pulled back his offending arms as he stood between Chet and Knox. "Listen to your sister, you damn *neanderthal*," he spat.

Chet, momentarily stunned, moved his attention from Charlie to Knox, back to Charlie. Charlie had fight in his stance, murder in his eyes; Knox, meanwhile, was looking up in surprise—his tremble had ceased, and… *something* was beginning to bloom on his features. Once Chet recovered, though, he only laughed.

"Calm down," he taunted, right in Charlie's face. "I'm just having a little *fun*. It's not my fault your *boyfriend's* a pathetic, little—"

Neil barely had time to react before it happened; one second Chet was smirking mockingly down at Charlie, and the next Charlie had thrown out his fist—it connected with the other boy's nose with a sickening crack, and Chet reeled back at the impact. Neil quickly stepped in, wrangling Charlie back, soon joined by all the other poets rushing over. Chet lunged forward, blood dribbling down his chin and onto his shirt, but was tackled by both Ginny and Adam (*primarily* by Adam, who was putting his experience on the football team to good use. For the *second* time this fortnight).

“Just leave it, Chet,” Adam advised. “It’s not worth it.”

Todd came up to Neil, tapping him on his shoulder and thumbing towards the open double doors. Neil, not before ensuring that the other boys had a proper grip on Charlie, eventually joined him as Ginny and Adam (again, primarily Adam) led Chet outside—during which he continued to hurl insults and threats across the room at Charlie. Charlie snarled back, staring hard, while Knox watched on with that now fully bloomed *something*.

Neil recognised it as *revelation*.

He and Todd gave the other boys a wave as they left and, just as the doors closed behind them, Neil caught a glimpse of Knox walking up to Charlie, asking if he was okay. Neil grinned to himself as he took Todd’s hand in his, skipping their way back down to where the car was parked. They were a few feet removed from the others, Chet now going willingly and quietly, guarded on both sides by the equally quiet Ginny and Adam. None of them spoke as they climbed into the car.

As soon as they were inside, though—

“Jesus *Christ*— You didn’t tell me your stupid little plan involved my nose getting broken!”

Adam rummaged through the glovebox, looking for something to clean up the mess, as Neil answered.

“I honestly didn’t think Charlie had it in him,” he confessed. “Sorry.”

Adam eventually produced a handkerchief, which he offered it out to Chet—the boy snatched it instantly, wiping away the blood dripping from his nose. “If it’s any consolation, your nose is *not* broken,” Adam added.

“It’s not.” Then Chet spun around to face the backseat. “And you *better* be sorry! Ginny, you owe me *way more* than one month of chores for this—”

“That’s fair,” Ginny replied, seated beside Todd, who was seated beside Neil. A carefully placed bag covered where the two were still holding hands, not that Chet was paying any mind to that currently. “What do you want?”

“*Three* months of chores, at least.”

“How about instead… I tell Chris you busted your nose defending her honour?” Ginny suggested, as she clicked in her seatbelt.

“How would that even work?” Chet asked.

“What if one of the guys was like… stalking her, or something?” Adam chimed in.

“And you o-overheard about it,” Todd supplied.

“So you taught him a lesson,” Ginny concluded, a little too emphatically.

“These are my friends you’re talking about…” Neil grumbled.

Ginny reached over Todd to tap Neil’s knee. “Of course, *we* know that none of your friends would do that, Neil. It’ll just be some random, unnamed Welton guy.”

Neil still wasn’t entirely satisfied, but Chet had his hand on his jaw considering it, so he didn’t argue the point any further. Eventually, Chet nodded, turning back to the front. “Ugh, *fine*, that’ll do. God, I can’t believe I helped out ghost boy for *that*.”

“Speaking of which— Do you think it even worked?” Adam queried, twisting around in his seat.

Neil gave him a smile. “It certainly *looked* like it worked,” he announced. “Knox and Charlie haven’t spoken to each other for *ages*. I think our little charade will do them both good.”

“I mean— I don’t know how *being overly friendly* to Charlie did them any good, but I’ll take your word for it.”

Chet looked witheringly at Adam, as he wiped at his red-streaked philtrum. “I can’t believe your job was to laugh at everything one guy said, while *my* job was to get punched in the face.”

“Would you wanted to have swapped?” Adam offered.

“*Hell* no,” Chet answered, without a millisecond of delay.

“That’s what I thought— Anyway, our *first* little charade certainly did *you two* good.” Adam looked back to Neil and Todd, and winked. Even though there was *no* way he could’ve seen their connected hands, Neil’s face still crawled with heat. “It stands to reason we know what we’re doing.”

“It wasn’t… *exactly* the same,” Neil pointed out. “Todd and I just had to… talk it out. Those two needed a *demonstration*.”

“Either way, you both needed a *push*,” Ginny stated.

“You actors and your *theatrics*,” Chet sighed from the front seat, cloth now stuck in his nostrils. “At least I got to make fun of Overstreet for a little bit… Let’s just get away from this old-ass school before it crumbles into dust.”

Chet wrenched on the ignition, slowly but surely pulling his car off of the curb and out onto the road leading down Welton hill. As they cruised their way past the gate, Adam having turned on the radio, Todd leant over to whisper in Neil’s ear.

“Do you really think that Knox and Charlie will sort it out, now?”

Neil wet his lips, thinking on all the small moments of the two he’d kept stashed away. All of the complaints they’d levied against each other, all of the hours they’d shared together, all of their pains and wants and beliefs.

“I do,” Neil declared, and found as soon as he’d said it, he believed it. “They might’ve needed some meddling to get the job done, but now that it *is*…”

“It’ll all just fall into place now?”

“I think so.” Neil turned laid back in his seat, turning his head to meet Todd’s eyes. He smiled. “Though you never know— They’re as bad as us.”

“Are you sure?” Todd grinned, his tone doubtful.

“Hm. Good point.” Neil squeezed Todd’s palm behind his strategically situated satchel. “Maybe just a *little* less worse than us, then.”

“So we’re the worst?”

Outside, the car rolled onto the main road, tyres crunching over snow and gravel. Neil barely noticed it, busy being driven *insane* by the boy next to him.

“We’re the worst,” he affirmed, hopelessly fond. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

chapter too long, chapter got split, add another one to the chapter count, tale as old as time...

title is from Second Nature. This time I SWEAR we are on the homestretch 🧿🧿🧿

Glory Of The Snow

Chapter Summary

It's the day of the first performance of the play.

Chapter Notes

Do I really need to explain where this chapter title is from?

Chet pulled up on the street outside the theatre, rubber squealing against the pavement. Adam squawked at him, to which the boy in the driver's seat pointed out that *Adam* had been the one fretting that they wouldn't arrive on time—a worry not entirely unfounded; their escapades at Welton had cost them more time than they'd thought they would, so that now they were scrambling at their seatbelts to not miss out on the pre-rehearsal preparation.

Neil clicked open the car door to his right, reluctantly unlinking his hand from Todd's in order to do so. Stepping out onto the path, he reached back for his satchel—only to find it being handed out towards him, strap dangled from Todd's fist. Neil quickly scanned what everybody else was doing; Adam was also climbing out, brushing off his coat, while the two Danburry siblings were preoccupied discussing when their parents were set to arrive. Finding the others all suitably distracted, Neil grabbed at his satchel only to press it down—along with Todd's hand—into the seat he'd just vacated, balancing on his outstretched arms as he leant forward.

"Stay," he whispered, down towards Todd's confused expression.

"Stay?" Todd peered out of the car, looking up at the theatre building looming above them. "Neil, what— What do you mean?"

"Stay for the dress rehearsal," Neil explained. "You're watching the performance tonight, aren't you?" Todd nodded, and even if Neil hadn't needed the confirmation (he was *well aware* Todd would be

there tonight) it still made his face split into a smile. “So *stay*. You can hang around after the dress rehearsal. It’ll be great.”

Todd moved his head, continuing to gaze past Neil, this time towards the front doors—the entryway to the ever-feared lobby. “I— I wouldn’t be allowed, Neil—”

“They won’t mind, trust me,” Neil assured him. “There’s always people running around, y’know, for the lights and such— They won’t even *notice*.”

Todd swallowed, uncertainty ringing his pupils.

Neil lowered his voice to a breath. “You don’t *need* to, if you don’t want to— But *I* want you there, Todd.” He tightened his grip, shifting his hand so that his weight pinned Todd’s hand down beneath the fabric of the bag. Todd’s focus fell first to the satchel, before climbing up Neil’s sleeves and to his face.

Neil waited for his luck to run out, for the invitation to have been a step too far. He waited for the winds to shift, for a polite rejection, for a hand waved out the back window of the car as it drove away from the theatre. A nervous apprehension gripped him, before finally, Todd replied—

“O-Okay.”

“Okay?” Neil stammered back.

“Okay. I’ll s-stay.”

Then the other boy grinned, matching Neil's own, and Neil felt his breath slough softly away from his control. He recovered just enough to pull himself back up straight—bumping his head against the top of the car door frame, much to his embarrassment—before dragging Todd out by the boy's grip on the satchel. Todd went willingly, laughing lightly as Neil rubbed at the bump forming on his skull.

For their credit, both Ginny and Adam barely mentioned it when Todd stood with them on the curb. They seemed entirely unsurprised by the development, not stuttering once when they wished their farewells to Chet through the opened passenger side window. Chet himself raised an eyebrow, but was on far too rushed of a schedule to complain; Todd would've been another stop added to his itinerary this morning, and so he only gave a silent nod as he pulled his car back out onto the street.

"Come on," Neil urged, bumping his shoulder against Todd's. "Let's get inside." He gestured over to where Ginny and Adam were already hurrying out of the cold, remarking on how they were going to be *late* —or, well, *Adam* was remarking they were going to be late. Ginny appeared unbothered as she followed in his hastened footsteps, throwing a look over her shoulder at the pair of boys.

"Yeah," Todd said back. The strap of Neil's satchel was still wrapped around his fingers, and he used that fact to tug Neil forwards. "L-Let's go."

Neil allowed himself a breath of relief as they walked across the threshold, the warmth flushing out the frigidness from his bones. Many of Neil's fellow actors were already running around backstage when the four entered, throwing on costumes and relaying props from one wing to the other. Todd was obviously taken aback by the busyness of it all, but Neil drank it in; to him, the noise and chaos were a part of the charm, as natural as the worn wood beneath his feet.

Ginny materialised at their side, Adam already having run off to the clothing racks to fetch his attire. “Todd, I know a spot where it’s a little less crowded— You’ll get a pretty good view of the stage, too.” She spun around to Neil. “*You* need to go get your hair fixed.”

Neil sighed, absent-mindedly raking his fingers through his fringe. “I know, I know—” he murmured, meeting Todd’s eyes. “Will you be alright to…?”

“I’ll be fine,” Todd answered.

“I’ll take care of him, don’t worry,” Ginny added, before shooing Neil towards the theatre stylist. “Now quick— You’ll need the time to get your sticks and bird’s nest on.”

Neil took one last look at Todd before he began winding his way through the crowd. It was silly, he knew—if he could trust *anyone* with Todd, it would be Ginny. And no, it wouldn’t be *practical* for the two of them to be glued together the whole time, and neither did Neil need to concern himself with keeping the boy in his sight. He trusted *full well* that he’d see him after the lights went down on the dress rehearsal.

Still, none of that meant that Neil wasn’t *entirely loath* to be away from him.

And from the apologetic smile Todd had shot him as he disappeared away to wherever Ginny’s hiding spot was (no doubt taking a detour, so that she could interrogate him for every detail of what had happened that morning), the feeling was mutual.

The thought of that proved enough to put a kick in Neil's step, and he skipped across the backstage with a renewed vigour. Not even a chiding from Evelyn, the lady in charge of hair and makeup, could put a damper on his emotions—despite how snappily she peeled a comb through his locks, as she tutted about how *this will have to do*, and *we'll sort this properly later*, and *you really need to get going if you're going to make it on time*.

From there, Neil found himself a vacancy among the curtain-doored dressing rooms in which he could swiftly don his costume. When Ginny referred to it as his *sticks and bird's nest*, she wasn't exactly wrong in her simplification—outside of the forest green jumper and pants Neil had tucked under his arm, which he now deposited on the small vanity setup, all that was left for his transformation into Puck really was… just *that*.

Around his wrists he tied bundles of twigs, evergreen leaves, and winterberries, tucking the ends of the bundles into the cuffs of the jumper. Neil had initially needed help securing the foliage to his arms, but over the handful of weeks they had had the costume sorted, he'd become impressively practiced at stringing it up himself. With his *sticks* done, next was the *bird's nest*; a wreath of similar make to the adornments decorating his wrists, a tightly twined circlet of tree sprigs peppered with red holly. He placed it delicately atop his smoothed-out locks, sitting it on his skull with a sense of reverence—it may have looked like a bird's nest, but to Neil, it had always felt more like a crown.

Then, nothing was left but for Neil to check himself in the mirror, pull back the curtain, and then dash back over to Evelyn to have his makeup done. All the while, he kept one eye out for a certain head of sandy-blonde hair, swallowing his disappointment when his search proved fruitless. He was barely finished in time for the beginning of the dress rehearsal, the first scene having started just as he tumbled over to the rest of the cast, already waiting in the wings.

Neil sidled up beside Adam, who was dressed in a cloak matching the verdant shade of Neil's jumper. He, too, wore a wreath, though his

was of twisting, bare branches, with two protruding from either side like antlers. Up close, Neil could see the seams of where they'd been glued onto the headwear, the very same lines that would be invisible from the audience's perspective.

"Ready?" Adam asked.

Neil, however, had his attention diverted once more—Ginny had said that Todd would be able to see the stage, from wherever she was squirrelling him away to. Which meant, naturally, that from the *stage*, Neil should have a clear view of *him*. He peered out into the empty theatre seating, moving his gaze from ol' one-and-two sat in the front row, surveying the whole space.

It wasn't until he looked up that he saw it—up in the rigging, where the spotlight was being handled by a boy dressed all in black, flanked on one side by a familiar face. Todd watched over the railing as onstage Ginny and Oliver began lamenting of their characters' forbidden love. Todd looked entirely enraptured, and Neil no doubt was wearing a similar expression as he followed the other boy's gaze down to the two actors.

As the characters spoke, bewailing their dire situation, Neil felt his demeanour shift. He felt that nervous apprehension take hold of him once more, a small voice whispering that surely it was all too *good*, all too *perfect*—

Something had to give, didn't it? Perhaps the lanterns nestled among the false shrubbery, which cast dancing dots of lights amidst the painted backdrop, would be clicked on at the wrong moment. It had happened last dress rehearsal, interrupting one of Theseus' speeches. Or maybe when Neil lifted the love-in-idleness flower above his paper leaf, and squeezed the small bottle hidden within its stem, it will have run out of water—they replaced the liquid before every show, but who knows if someone forgot? And there was always a chance that Adam, despite his rigorous practice, would blank on a line, replacing the

scripted words with his own. Neil wouldn't mind, but it was always disheartening to see how the stage directors treated him whenever he did so.

Neil shuddered, and did his best to shake the thoughts as he turned back to Adam. He beamed as bright as the lights beyond the curtain, no matter what doubts swam behind his eyelids. Whatever happened, he decided, would happen. It couldn't possibly outweigh the *joy*, the *excitement*, the *brilliance* of the day thus far, and the day yet to come.

"Ready," he repeated back, speaking the word like a mantra. Then he set his gaze back out to the stage, willing his heart to slow its pace.

And he waited for his cue.

The dress rehearsal went by as smooth as satin—no hiccups, kinks, or confusions, of any sort. The lanterns had been clicked on and off with no delay, perfectly timed with the curtains closing on each scene; Neil had pulled the love-in-idleness flower up, and droplets cascaded down its petals just as they should; even Adam had been on his best behaviour, with all of his lines remaining entirely unchanged from the original script (as far as Neil could tell, at least, and for Neil that was *far*).

However, the idealness of the production did nothing to snuff his apprehension. If anything, it had *worsened* the growing unease in Neil's stomach, thinking about how well it had all gone. Even as he bounded off stage, buzzing along with the rest of the cast, he couldn't help the dread creeping up the vertebrae of his spine—all the ways that the performance tonight could go askew now pervading his foremost thoughts. It didn't help that he'd looked up towards the rigging at the rehearsal's conclusion, as they practiced the order for the curtain call, and wasn't able to spot Todd among the spotlights

above.

Neil, not wanting to dampen anyone else's spirits, retreated to a dressing room shortly after the play's conclusion. When questioned by Mary, he made the excuse of needing to untangle his wreath from his messied hair, a point he supported by attempting to separate the crown from his head—and being completely unable to, at least not without tearing off a tuft or two.

Once crammed into the chair of the vanity, curtain drawn behind him, Neil let the energy bleed out of his body. He let the electricity hum through his whole being like a current through a powerline, let the all-too-familiar blend of nerves and excitement swirl within him like nausea. There was a certain vertigo, Neil had found, with his being *here*—at opening night, he'd *made it*, he'd finally *made it*—and he had to wait until his head stopped spinning before turning up to his own reflection.

With a grimace, Neil started the task he'd *wished* he'd been lying to Mary about. Slowly, and deliberately, he began untwisting the circlet of sticks from his head, one strand at a time.

He distracted himself from his concerns by noting the time on his wristwatch, laid out on the table beside him—he'd swiped it from his Welton pants on the way, folded neatly beside his satchel. By now, the poets would all be out of class, most likely piling into the bathroom to begin preparing for the evening ahead of then. The Captain, who would be driving them to the very venue Neil now inhabited, would likely be doing the very same—though in the quarters of his cramped teacher's dorm.

Neil had heard something about Charlie 'getting red', and didn't dare speculate on whatever the hell *that* entailed. At the thought, Neil was reminded of how he'd last seen the boy; blood on his knuckles, a sneer to his smirk, and his whole expression turning to soft surprise as Knox moved over to check up on him. He wondered if the two had finally

sorted it out by now—he made a mental note to corner one of the two (or both) in the common room that night, after the performance. Ginny wasn't the only one who could *interrogate* her friends.

Wincing, Neil carefully drew a miserably small number of strands from where they were knotted around his crown. This process wasn't normally so tedious, but the rush job beforehand had meant that Neil's hair had been mussier than ever when he dressed. He had to append his full focus on extracting his locks from the blooms of winterberries, so much so that he barely registered when someone knocked against the doorframe.

"Come in!" Neil called.

The curtain was pulled open with a squeak of rings against rod, followed soon after by a subsequent squeak signalling its pulling shut. Neil remained zeroed in on a particularly stubborn assortment of stray hairs, caught in some fraying twine, such that it was impossible to tell what fibres belonged to him and what fibres belonged to the string—not until Neil gave them a tug, and a shot of pain knifed through his scalp. It wasn't until he heard a distinct cough that he glanced up at the room's reflection, recognising the figure in the mirror—

"Todd!"

Todd walked up haltingly, resting his hands atop the back of Neil's chair. His eyes met Neil's in the mirror, sparkling as he lowered his gaze. "Hey," he muttered, leaning over. "I w-was looking for you."

"I was looking for *you*," Neil muttered back, angling his head back. "You weren't up in the rigging at the end…"

"I'd, uh… a-already left," Todd admitted, and Neil could hear his

fingers tapping against the wood of the chair. “I was hoping to catch y-you backstage, but Mary said you’d rushed off…”

Oh, went Neil’s thoughts. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s not a problem,” Todd hummed. “I just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

Neil felt the unease climb back up his throat, the foreboding *apprehension* pooling in his gut—the sense that it was only a matter of time before the sword dangling over his head dropped. He ignored it, however, busying himself with the warmth that flooded him from the concern colouring Todd’s tone.

“I’m alright,” he assured the other boy. “I was just… I just needed a little quiet after the rehearsal, was all.” Neil swallowed down the dread, bitter in his mouth. It had no place here, he thought. Not among the glitzy lights, the smell of velvet, and the pair of powder blue eyes in the mirror.

“Okay,” Todd replied, voice small. He stepped back one pace, then two, then three. Neil caught how flushed he was in the mirror, the boy’s face turned scarlet. “O-Okay, I just wanted to make sure—”

“Todd,” Neil interrupted, pushing his seat back and standing up—before spinning around, leaning back onto the vanity’s tabletop.

“Y-Yes?”

Neil couldn’t help but have his mouth curl upwards at the ends as he took in the subtle chew of the lip, the drumming of the fingers—

“Was— *Is* there something else you wanted?”

Todd had the grace to act abashed, raising one hand to fiddle with his collar as he looked between the mirror, the wristwatch, the chair that Neil had kicked to the side—anywhere but Neil’s face. “I— N-Not really, I just wanted—”

“Wanted *what*, Todd?” Neil asked, teasing the words between his teeth. He was being cruel, he knew it, but he’d make it up to the other boy soon enough.

“It’s j-just… we got interrupted. *Earlier*.” Todd finally let his eyes fall on Neil’s face, his features so soft it made Neil’s fingernails dig into the underside of the vanity. “This m-morning, and b-before that… Out by the river, that n-night…”

“We did,” Neil agreed, trying to disguise how his breath hitched.

“B-But now…” Todd’s voice shrank to a whisper, though Neil heard it as if it were right in his ear. “Now, we’ve got time.”

Neil did his best to keep himself still. “We do.”

Todd, meanwhile, took a single, shaking step forward. “And n-no one’s waiting on us just yet.”

“Not to my knowledge,” Neil mused.

Todd took another step towards him. “And we’re h-hidden away,” he continued.

“We’re hidden away.”

Todd took one final step, so close to Neil that he could feel the warmth of the other boy radiating out from him. Neil raised a hand, twigs and leaves and berries rustling as he cupped Todd’s chin.

“And y-you want t-to—?” Todd’s breath fanned against his, the boy’s eyes dipping to his mouth and then pulling back up. In his pupils Neil saw a hesitance, a certain disbelief—

Which all vanished as Neil nodded, once, assuredly, not risking any embarrassment if his voice cracked speaking. And that—

That was all it took for Todd to lean forward, and press his lips to Neil’s.

And *everything* but that feeling faded to black.

Everything but the gentle fingers now twining in his hair, up to the wreath sat on his skull, digging into the bed of tangled locks. It was only the sensation of sparks against Neil’s mouth, the incidental knock of a forehead against his crown, a small ghost of a laugh feathering over his lips—

It was awkward, of course; their noses bumped between them, the sticks tied around Neil’s wrist scratched the skin of his neck as he laced his fingers with Todd’s, and his breaths came out shallow and wanting as his lungs begged for air. There was makeup on Neil’s face

that now was being ruined, if not being stamped onto Todd's, and he could only imagine the mess they'd both look after all was done.

It was awkward, but—

It was also *everything*.

So none of that mattered.

After a moment that was seconds, months, *years* too short, they pulled away from each other. Or, well, they tried to—at some point, Todd's sandy-blonde fringe had joined Neil's own in getting caught amidst the foliage of his wreath. Both boys chuckled, breathless, as Neil reached up to untie them.

"Sorry, it gets stuck very easily—" Neil struggled to unpick Todd's hairs with his twig-wrapped hands, not without poking either of their eyes out, at least. Todd eventually caught Neil by the sleeves and pulled him away.

"Allow me." Holding his fingers as steadily as Neil had ever seen them, Todd nimbly unwound himself from the other boy. Pulling himself out of his slouch to see what he was doing, he played with some of Neil's prior, unsuccessful attempts before separating his hair from its prison—yet despite his own freedom, Todd still made a disapproving noise in the back of his throat. Fetching the chair from the side of the dressing room, Todd guided Neil back into the seat.

Neil was about to open his mouth, tell Todd that he really *didn't* need to help, Neil was *fine*, really—but Todd was already fussing over Neil's scalp, working his tufts of hair out from the bouqueted mess of twine, holly, and tree-sprigs. Neil didn't realise he was smiling, watching Todd's reflection deftly pick through his hair, until Todd's gaze met

his own and he returned Neil's grin.

Neil started, felt his heat face up, and then slowly sunk down in the chair—closing his eyes, comfortably listening to the rustle of his crown and the tattoo of Todd's breath.

"Todd…?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Earlier..." Neil began, melting a little at the sensation of Todd's fingers in his hair. "I was… I was *worried*."

Todd huffed, and Neil felt it float down the back of his neck—if he screwed his lids shut tight enough, it was almost as if they were back on that Welton-issued bike, riding tandem down a streetlamp-lit alley.

"Worried about what?" Todd inquired.

"Well, it's…" Neil searched for the words, out in the dark of his closed eyes. "The last day. This morning, that rehearsal, the performance tonight… *You*." Neil felt the hands atop his head still for a moment, before going back to unweaving twig from tuft. "It's all felt… like a *dream*."

Todd giggled, fondly. "And that's a worry?"

"Not *that*," Neil explained, laughing along. His merriment trailed off as his mouth twisted, the feeling of Todd's lips against them still fresh.

“I’m just… I’m scared that it really *is* a dream.” Neil fluttered open his eyes, leaning his head back, so that he could stare up at Todd once more. “I’m— I’m scared that I’m going to wake up soon, and everything will be *wrong*.”

“I kn-know what you mean,” Todd uttered, winding his hands around Neil’s wreath—giving it a tender tug, testing if it was ready to be removed just yet. It wasn’t, and so he stopped just before it would cause the other boy any pain. “I s-sometimes feel as if you’re just a f-figment of my imagination, that I’ll l-look and… and y-you won’t be *there*.” Todd sighed, long and dragging. “It j-just feels too good to be true. Like…”

“Like you’re just waiting for something terrible to happen,” Neil finished.

“Exactly.” Todd smiled down at Neil, working out what felt like the last few tangles of hair. “L-Like you said— That you’ll *w-wake up*, and reality will hit you.”

“Hmm.” Neil closed his eyes once more, though didn’t pull his head back from where it was resting. “Todd?”

“Yes?”

“Let’s never leave this dressing room,” Neil murmured.

“Wh-What?”

“Think about it,” Neil said, feeling a weight pulled off of his head. He opened his eyes to see Todd lifting off Neil’s crown, detaching it from

his hair without so much as a sting. “If we never leave this dressing room, nothing terrible can happen. We won’t ever to have to wake.”

“That’d be nice.” Todd placed the wreath on the vanity’s tabletop, gently, reverently. It sat beside Neil’s wristwatch as Todd rested his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “But we have to, eventually. Y-You’ve got a play to perform—” Todd combed his fingers through Neil’s now-freed hair. “—and *I’ve* got a play to watch.”

“That’s true,” Neil relented. He looked back at the mirror, finally taking in his appearance. “Not to mention I have to get my makeup redone. *Somebody* ruined it for me.”

Todd also scanned his reflection, becoming aghast as he saw the foundation pressed onto his face. “Yes, *s-somebody*…” Todd trailed off as he stepped backward once more, letting Neil rise out of the seat.

Once he had, he leant towards Todd and—simply because the opportunity was too tempting, and the dream too good at that present moment—snuck forward and stole another kiss. Neil felt some satisfaction leaving the other boy as tongue-tied as Neil had been, a surprised blush crawling up his cheeks. He quickly walked past him, hand resting on the curtain.

“Come on,” he called. “Before we both wake up.”

Todd barely protested as Neil pulled him over to Evelyn, only stopping to wipe away some lipstick on his sleeve. Neil wasn’t sure if the dressing room had just been dim, or if the theatre was little more brightly lit as they stepped out. Neil had his crown in one hand, Todd’s hand in the other, and his pocket watch was sitting safely returned to his satchel by the time they arrived at the stylist’s station.

There he found Mary again, already chatting away with Evelyn—though she quickly wheeled around from the conversation as soon as she spotted the pair.

"Oh! Hey!" she exclaimed, cheerfully. "There you are, Todd. Ginny's been searching for you."

"She has?" Todd asked.

"Yes, she was here not long ago," Evelyn butted in. Then she pointed her comb at Neil, and he almost jumped. "And I have been looking for *you*—"

Neil put both of his hands up, following the stylist's directions and sitting down in the chair in front of her. Adjacent, Todd had his head on a pivot, looking around at the actors and crew all lounging around.

"Should I go s-see if I can find Ginny, or?"

Neil shrugged, reaching out to hold onto Todd's sleeve. "Hey, it's a small backstage," he reasoned, as Evelyn began raking through his hair with her comb once more. "You tend to find who you're looking for quite easily."

"How *kind*," a voice drawled out from behind him.

"G-Ginny!"

"Todd," Ginny replied, grinning as she looked between Neil and Todd.

Neil, luckily, had an excuse to dodge her sly gaze—being instructed to look forward as the stylist marvelled at how neat his hair already was. Poor Todd had no such escape. “Where’d you go? You ran off as soon as the dress rehearsal ended.”

“I-I, uh…” Todd glanced at Neil, and then at the floor. “I forgot to g-give Neil something.”

“*Really*?” Ginny posited, sounding all too amused.

“Really,” Neil confirmed, suddenly feeling a little too hot in his costume.

“I’m glad,” Ginny stated, still looking between the two boys entertainedly. She paused when she caught a glimpse of Neil’s face, bending over to get a better look. “Say, Neil, what happened to your makeup—?”

“Todd!”

Neil had never been so glad for Adam’s existence in his yet short lifespan—

“And Neil, too,” the boy added, as Neil felt a hand land on his shoulder. It was shortly slapped away by the stylist, but Neil still appreciated it.

“Adam! What have you been doing?” Neil squeaked out, and Ginny *might’ve* smothered a laugh in the background at him latching onto the other boy’s presence. If she did, Neil pointedly ignored her.

“Being bored, mostly,” Adam filled in. “Are we *really* not allowed out before the performance tonight?”

“Yes,” Evelyn answered, tone dry. “Unless you *want* to have your makeup and costume undone, and then redone, all before—”

“It’s just more practical,” Mary cut in, coming up to pat Adam on the back. “Besides, we don’t have to wait *too* long.”

“I know,” Adam sulked. “Still— What are we going to *do* until then?”

Neil hummed in thought. “I had a couple ideas.”

“Like what?” Adam queried, intrigue slipping into his voice.

“Well…” Neil looked up at the ceiling, gazing off into the distance. “This is Todd’s first time backstage, right?”

“It *is*,” Ginny concurred, understanding building in her pitch.

“And— If he’s okay with it—” Neil looked to Todd, who was smiling gratefully at him. At the other boy’s nod, he continued. “I thought we could… I don’t know, show him around? Introduce him to the rest of the cast?”

“That’s an excellent plan,” Mary said, before turning to Todd herself. “And you’re alright with that, Todd?”

Todd looked at her, and then to Neil. “If Neil thinks it’s a good idea,” he supplied, “then I’d be happy to.”

“Brilliant,” Adam commented. He spun to face the stylist, now finishing up with Neil’s hair—the job clearly having taken far less long than either she or Neil would’ve thought. “Evelyn, this is our friend Todd.”

In response, Evelyn packed up her comb and rolled her eyes. “I gathered that,” she droned, before gesturing at Neil to stand. “I don’t know what witchcraft you did to your hair, young man, but it better be that way for every one of these next performances.”

“I’ll try!” Neil called out, as the group began to move away. He immediately attached himself to Todd’s side, stage whispering in his ear. “Don’t mind her. She’s actually quite fond of us deep down.” Neil crinkled his brow, looking forward into the empty air. “I *think*.”

“She just gets put in a bad mood whenever someone’s hair is being difficult,” Adam elaborated, unashamedly having been listening in. “Which is Neil, most of the time.”

“It is *not*!” Neil crowed, clearing his throat as Todd, Ginny, and Mary giggled. He spun on his heel, stopping the group at a crossroads of doors. “So, where should we tour first? The prop room, or the main stage?”

From Evelyn’s rocky introduction, Todd’s excursion swiftly improved —or at least, Neil hoped it did. He could still feel that sinking dread, fainter now, but still present, somersaulting in his stomach. Neil knew he couldn’t quite flush it out of *his* system, per se, but he hoped that if he could at least keep it from Todd’s thoughts.

Their first stop, as voted by the group, was the room filled with all the unused props; Todd's jaw dropped as he saw the veritable *sea* of bizarre items, which the five had to wade through to inspect properly. It came up to Neil's waist, and he had to tread carefully not to break anything underfoot. He pointed out to Todd what props came from what previous production, who in turn made it his mission to find the stupidest object manageable. Neil doubled over with laughter when the boy returned with a whole set of wax fruit, each with a far-too realistic bite taken out of each.

From there, they continued onto the mainstage, moving among the scenery, Adam explaining how the wooden backdrops could be rotated around to display one of three faces; they were actually triangular pieces, able to be wheeled around if a play required a change of location, though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* only ever needed one. Ginny showed Todd where all the actors had scratched their initials on the side of one of the 'trees', and Neil watched on as the other boy traced his fingertips over the *N.P.* inscribed on the surface.

Next, in a reversal of roles, *Todd* was the one to show them around. This time, the group ascended the rigging, up where they controlled the spotlights—apparently, during his time hidden there before the dress rehearsal, Todd had gotten talking with the boy in charge of the main light. So it was with no trouble at all that Todd convinced him to begin talking the actors through the wiring, the directions, the cues. Neil had never been up there before, and enjoyed the novelty of looking *down* on the stage; thought the height made him dizzy, and he didn't particularly like how close Todd and the light-boy had gotten on such short notice.

They climbed down before they could be caught, entering backstage just in time to see lunch arranged on some pushed-together tables. It had been a while since breakfast, and dinner wouldn't be able to be had until *after* the performance—so the directors had organised some food to be delivered from the nearby bakery for the members of the cast and crew.

Gathered around the tables as those members were, Neil decided it was time to fulfil the second part to his plan—to introduce Todd to the rest of the cast.

Some of the players were from Ridgeway, naturally, and so were already familiar with his face. They had never caught his name before, though, and were shocked to realise that he shared more classes with him than they realised. The girl playing the fairy queen Titania, who was from Henley, had immediately taken an interest in Todd, barraging him with questions that were a little too enthusiastic for Neil's taste. Ginny had poked Neil in the side, told him subtly to wipe the withering look off of his face, to which Neil balked and denied the accusation. Ginny had barely contained her laughter; and then was unable to contain it any further when Neil practically steered Todd away from the conversation, the boy left a little bewildered.

David, playing Demetrius, shook Todd's hand, and made him turn as white as a sheet when he offhandedly mentioned recognising him from Balincrest. Todd breathed a little easier once it became evident that David seemed not to have been informed of *why* Todd had been suspended—or, at least, if he *had*, he wasn't letting it stop him from being friendly. Neil, sensing the discomfort in Todd's face, steered him away from that conversation as well.

At least with the mechanicals, played by a handful of Welton upperclassmen a year above Neil, there was no need to cut the colloquy short. They, of course, drew the connection between Todd and his brother near instantaneously—Todd himself was the one to bring his last name up, in a surprising twist of fate, which had set them off. In an even *more* surprising twist of fate, upon hearing that Todd was nothing like his brother, they *congratulated* him.

"No offence," one had said, "but your brother was bit of a *stiff*."

By the time they'd made the rounds, having met almost every cast member and toured all interesting corners of the theatre, it was practically time for the performance—Neil could hear cars begin to arrive on the street outside, and he noted that the ushers were taking their places near the doors.

This, naturally, was when Ginny chose to speak up about something that she'd been keeping to herself.

"Neil— You do realise you still need to get your makeup fixed, right?"

Neil cursed, and had to sprint his way over to the station. He received a lecture about his behaviour, but Evelyn simply sounded relieved that he wasn't there to have his hair done up again. Then from there he rushed over to try and locate his wreath, which he'd left by the dressing rooms—

Only to find Todd already there, holding it in his hands.

His back was turned, and gave a little yelp as Neil tapped him on the shoulder. When he saw it was Neil, the boy relaxed at once, especially when Neil ducked his head.

"Will you do the honours?" Neil asked.

Todd placed the bundled branches, leaves, and winterberries onto his head. He took a moment to adjust where it sat, tucking in a few sprigs which had been pulled out, but then whipped his hands away with a flourish.

"Th-There," Todd breathed, as Neil raised his head back up, meeting

the other boy's eyes. "Good luck out there."

Neil smiled. "Thank you. I'll be, uh— I'll be looking for you. Out in the audience."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Todd replied. There came a call from the directors, ordering everyone to move into place, and Neil felt Todd's hands wrap around his wrists.

Todd looked in all directions, then turned back to Neil, and pulled him in for one, final kiss—

And then he was hurrying away towards the exit, moving to find his seat out in the auditorium. Neil, himself, had no time to be as utterly *insane* as he was being driven to either, having to rush over to the curtains—lips still tingling as he joined Ginny, Mary, and Adam in the wings, all breathless with anticipation.

None of them spoke as the spotlights bloomed, and the curtains began to split open. As the audience was revealed, rows upon rows of heads, all keenly waiting.

Neil took a long inhale, calming whatever doubts still clung around his heart.

And with the pitter-patter footfall of a single actor walking onstage—

It begun.

The first face in the crowd Neil recognised was, incredibly, Mr. Keating. For as much as he'd been searching for Todd out there, his gaze just so happened to land on the Captain first—it was between scenes, a cursory glance stolen out of the theatre's wings, and Neil's eyes were already drawn to the line the poets formed. How couldn't he, when they'd made so much noise when he'd first stepped out from behind that tree? His friends had found a row right in the centre of the seating, Mr. Keating on one end, Pitts on the other; Pitts was easy to spot with his height, and both Meeks' and Cameron's hair gave them away in the moderate lighting. Which left only two figures tucked together in the middle, sitting just a little too close to each other, one of them shaking with barely withheld laughter as the other whispered jokes into his ear.

The next face Neil recognised was the one he'd expected to clock onto initially. A head of sandy-blonde hair, sat near the front where his helpless smile almost made Neil stumble over his line—not for the first time on that stage, he reminded himself. Next to Todd was Mr. and Mrs. Danburry, who were both equally enthralled by the performance, with Neil swearing he could see tears in the man's eyes. Besides Todd was a blonde girl, her hair a shade more golden than his. *Chris*, Neil knew, though he rarely saw her without the company of one of the two Danburry siblings.

The last face Neil recognised… stood out from the rest. He felt it as soon as he saw it; the knife twist, the sword fall, the storm clouding over. He'd barely peeked past the curtain before stumbling backwards, as if burnt, the blood draining from beneath his makeup. Sweat gathered in the twigs tucked up his sleeves, and Neil had to peek again to ensure he'd seen it correctly.

But he had.

Somehow, despite needing to be in Chicago for another *week*—

Neil's father had arrived.

He stood at the back of the theatre, watching on with his cold, grey eyes, and Neil—

"Neil," a voice hissed behind him, and Neil tensed. He turned around, but it was only one of the directors. "That's your cue, Neil, come on."

Neil hurried towards the curtain, his steps suddenly feeling too light against the floorboards. A pit was growing in his stomach, the apprehension of before swelling into panic—

How was his father *here*? Hadn't he *allowed* Neil to do this? And if so —

If so, what was he here *for*?

Whatever the answer was, Neil didn't look out into the audience anymore after that. He kept his attention among the actors up on stage, with him, allowing his lines and mannerisms to flow out despite the dread washing over him. He continued with his playful act, his mischievous nature, his dances with the fairies and his antics with the lovers, and no matter how tempted he was—he stayed within this world he'd weaved, within the dream, just a little longer.

It wasn't until his last soliloquy, turning out and addressing the crowd of people themselves, did Neil allow himself another look back near the entrance. Right to where his father stood, focus entirely on Neil. Neil swallowed, wetting where his throat had run dry, as he spoke—

He spoke of night, of making amends, of dreams and visions, of all

being mended. He spoke with a weak smile, a weaker hope, his very last effort to prove to himself that he was *wrong*—

He was wrong to think that this night would end poorly, to anticipate tragedy as he did. He was wrong to feel doomed, to feel cursed, to feel as if everything good before had come only to make its upset worse. He was *wrong*, he told himself, over and over, as the audience broke into rapturous applause, standing to their feet.

As his fellow cast members came out to join him on the stage, arranging themselves in their practiced order. As each took their bow during the curtain call, and the cheers rang loud in Neil's ears. As his friends jostled him to the front once more, spurring him to take a second bow, as the poets yawped and the Danburry's clapped and Todd mouthed something to Neil that he was too teary-eyed to make out.

He told himself he was *wrong* to dread.

As they filtered backstage, felicitations pouring like champagne as everybody patted each other on the back, congratulating one another. Neil was heaped with praise, Ginny almost giving him a concussion with how excitedly she shook him. As a woman came up to tell Neil that his father was waiting for him, and he had to creep off to a dressing room to peel off his crown. As he carried it in his hands, changed back into his Welton clothes, and emerged out into the theatre proper.

He told himself he was *wrong* to doubt.

As he was searching, smiling, finding his father's eyes—and as his father wasn't smiling back. As Neil took in the grim expression, the set of his jaw, the way his walk was a soldierly march. As Neil's grin became an ache he'd once had, gone now, and his father pulled him

outside by the arm. As the faces Neil had recognised—the Captain, the poets, Mr. and Mrs. Danburry, Chris, *Todd*—tried to speak with him once they pushed through the double doors outside, the freezing wind cutting through Neil's coat. As he barely heard their kind words, too busy being dragged along the pavement towards Neil's father's car parked on the curb. As Mr. Keating came up, only to be rebuffed by his father; as Charlie broke from where he'd been plastered to Knox's side, calling out to him; as Todd stared through the window as Neil was shoved into the passenger side seat—

He told himself, even then, that he was *wrong* to deny himself joy that day. To deny himself mirth, to deny himself happiness, to deny himself *hope*.

As his hands shook while he pulled on his seatbelt with one, fingers trembling against his wreath still gripped in the other. As he locked eyes with Todd through the window, offering the smallest of smiles, the tiniest of waves, the thinnest of nods. As Todd stood there, distraught, knees buckling in the newly fallen snow. As he was helped up by Charlie, brought over to the rest of the poets, soon joined by Ginny, Mary, and Adam, all exiting the theatre. As his father climbed in to the driver's seat, slammed shut the door, and everything and everyone Neil cared about rolled away from his view.

He told himself he was wrong to dread, to doubt, to deny—

He told himself he was wrong.

He told himself he was *wrong*.

He was wrong.

Neil had been wrong.

He was wrong, he was wrong, he was *wrong*.

It smelt like home in his father's study.

Not the home he'd been raised in, nor the one he was now trapped within the walls of. Not the home his father had just pulled into the drive of not long before now, greeted at the door by Neil's mother. Not the home that was dusty, cold, and haunted by ghosts.

His mother had been smoking before they'd entered, had just extinguished her cigarette in the ashtray when she'd let his father in. Thin wisps curled off of it, and the smell filled the room; it smelt of impromptu study sessions in his dorm, of a burnt patch of carpet lit by sparks and shoddy wiring, of meetings out in the woods where the river led to a cave.

As Neil had stated.

It smelt like home.

It was here in the study that Neil's father had elected to begin his business, as soon as the door to the Perry household was closed and the neighbours couldn't see what was happening. It was here that Neil's father began their conversation—

No, not a *conversation*—

What it was—and what it *always* was—was a *lecture*. A list of instructions. A carefully curated itinerary, routing each and every one of Neil's decisions from here to his deathbed.

"We're trying very hard," Neil's father spieled, "to understand why it is that you *insist* on defying us."

Neil looked up to his mother, his gaze flitting past the bookshelves lining the walls. She was sitting in an armchair, bottom lip trembling as she stared out the window.

"I was a fool to have let it get this far," Neil's father muttered, tapping away at the clean, glossy surface of his desk. His hand fell right beside where Neil's chair was positioned, the noise of his fingernail against wood echoing in the cavern-like space. "But no more. We're not going to let you ruin your life, you hear me?"

Neil gulped, hearing the words before they were spoken; lines that he had memorised, playing to a beat that he had rehearsed so very often.

"Tomorrow, I'm withdrawing you from that damned school," Neil's father continued. "And I'm going to enrol you in Braden Military School."

It was funny.

It was if he'd never left the theatre, never stepped off the stage. Neil knew the sentences his father said like they were words off of a script, written for a narrative, practiced then played by an actor. How could he not have loved acting? His whole life was a performance, his whole world a stage.

With the rueful comedy of the situation, came also a numbness that seized him—like a fever. He'd been threated with the notion of Braden too many times for it to be a novelty, but the reality of it still struck him like a sickness.

"You're going to Harvard. You're going to be a doctor."

It was those words which ultimately shook Neil from his stupor—those ten words, which dictated his entire life. The words which his father continued to etch upon the inside of his skull, as if he didn't know them off by heart at this point.

As if Neil couldn't repeat them to himself in his sleep, if he wanted to.

As if Neil couldn't them to himself in his *grave*, if he wanted to.

"But that's— That's ten more years, father," he protested, frailly. "That's— That's a *lifetime*—"

"Oh *stop it*," his father demanded, cutting him off. "Don't be so… *dramatic*. You make it sound like a prison term." His father sighed, setting his palm down flat atop the desk. It rattled beneath him, the metal handles of the drawers behind clattering with the motion. "You don't… You don't understand, Neil. You have opportunities—Opportunities I couldn't even *dream* of— And I am *not* going to let you throw them away, just like that—"

Neil was on his feet before he knew it, not entirely sure where the sudden heat came from; perhaps the chill outside had dulled his reason, or the day of performance had run his brain ragged—

Or, he had finally scrounged up a miniscule scrap of courage.

"Doesn't it matter how *I* feel?"

Neil was vaguely aware of his mother also leaping to her feet in the background, her voice joining the chorus of shouts. His attention, however, remained squarely trained on his father, meeting the narrowed grey pupils with a rapidly diminishing fortitude.

"And what is *it*?" his father yelled. "Tell me what you *feel*, tell me what it *is*!"

And Neil—

Neil's mouth ran dry once more, the words catching in his throat, his fight wavering—

For a white-hot second, he wanted to cry. To beg. To weep—

He looked between his mother and father, his mother close to tears, his father's hands balled up into fists. And—

What could he say?

He had spent all of his excuses, all of his persuasion, all of his trickery that phone call not twenty-four hours before, and it hadn't—

It hadn't been enough.

None of it.

None of it had been enough.

What could he possibly say *now*? What could he possibly *do* now? The remainder of his life was, right in from of him, being wrested from his grasp—if ever it was in his grasp to begin with—and all he could do was sink back down into his seat, the feeling fading from his flesh. He recognised the stiffness invading his deadened limbs, this time; rigor mortis, early onset, a sign that his heart had stopped.

A sign that he was no more, now, than a corpse walking.

“Is it more of this— This *acting* business?” his father cried, tone sharp and resonant in the hollow space of the study. “Because you can forget all of *that*—”

“Nothing,” Neil uttered, voice quiet. So quiet it couldn’t even discontinue his father’s tirade—Neil had to clear his throat to do that, had to choke out the word a little louder. “*Nothing*. It was— It was nothing.”

The confession hung in the air, and it was more than what it was. It was an admission of defeat, a white flag raised, an acceptance of the sentence thrust upon him. Neil felt his fate solidify as his vision unfocused, as his own speech reverberated against the walls, as he sealed his future in stone—if ever it was carved from anything else.

“Nothing,” Neil’s father repeated. “Well then… We have nothing more to discuss. We’ll to bed, and in the morning—” He wandered over to doorway, turning his coat the side. “We’ll discuss your *future*.”

And then his father strode away, nothing more than a set of footsteps stamping up the stairs. Neil felt his mother come up behind him, the only scent of home he could smell on her being the nicotine on her breath. He stared to his side as she knelt down beside him, following his gaze as he spoke.

"I was good," he said, as if surprised. At what, he couldn't say. "I was — I was *really* good."

Perhaps he was surprised that he'd ever thought that *that* would be enough.

Because it hadn't.

Not in the end.

"Go on, get some sleep," his mother told him, nodding. Neil saw that she was looking where he was looking, and wondered—

Did she think that he was only watching the empty space? Staring off into the middle distance, images of the brilliant day he'd had floating before him like apparitions?

…or did she know?

Could she see that his eyes scored into the wood grain of the desk—so that if they pierce through the material, they'd land directly on the metal handle of the drawer behind?

The only drawer with a lock on it?

Neil wondered if she knew.

He thought she may have.

He couldn't think of any other reason she would be crying.

Up in his bedroom, it was cold. Outside the wind was a low whistle, a breath pinned to the back of the throat, as Neil shed his Welton clothes. There was a distant clamour of Neil's parents preparing for the night, but that was dulled and muffled by the walls that lay between them and their son. On Neil's bed laid a bathrobe, a towel, and a shaving kit. He thought that they must have once belonged to him.

He walked by them on his way to the window. The stillness of the night made the creak of the floor beneath his feet feel treacherous, the shrill cry of the boards yawning out into the dead air—disturbing the nocturnal peace the world was ravelled in.

The crown was still in Neil's hands, hadn't left them for a moment—the bound twigs were cutting into the flesh of his fingers with how tightly he gripped onto it. As though if he held it fast enough, imprinted the pattern to his palm long enough, hooked the barbed ends of wood deep enough into his skin, he could keep it. *All* of it. The play, the acting, the smiles and the adoration and the sunlit joy—

His knuckles were white, aching. There was a winterberry crushed under the pad of his thumb. A sprig had snapped under the pressure. Neil loosened his grasp, before gently—and reverently, ever-so

reverently—placing the crown down atop the table beneath the sill. His hands freed, he then proceeded to open his window, pulling up the glass pane with a smooth glide. The frozen breeze snuck in like a phantom, the distant howl of the swirling cloud above like the susurrus of a stream.

As Neil picked his crown up once more, placing it back atop his head, he wished that he could see the moon behind the cloud cover. He smiled at the thought.

It really had been a good day, if one ignored how it ended. From Neil waking up excited to be permitted to perform, to stitching together Knox and Charlie with his schemes, to bowing in front of a standing ovation—

And *Todd*. *Everything* that had happened with Todd— From the boy's crooked, unassured smile when he'd knocked on Neil's dorm door; to the texture of his hand in Neils, hidden behind the satchel in the backseat; to that very same hand tangling in his hair as he pressed his lips to Neil's in the dressing room—

Neil thought, perhaps, that today had been the happiest he'd ever been. The happiest he'd ever *be*.

Goosebumps prickled over his skin as he smiled, up into the sky, up towards where he couldn't quite make out the moon. Then he let his chin fall, his head lay limp against his chest, as he lowered his wreath to the table once more. And he almost turned, almost walked away, when—

When he stopped. Because some small, minute ray of light had fallen upon the lining of the crown, having slipped between the dark shapes above. It illuminated something caught in the boughs, a great *many* something's Neil noticed as he peered down, all twisted into the

innermost ring of twigs. They were—

A dozen or so tiny, purple-white flowers, stems braided into the foliage. It seemed almost as if the circlet was blooming with them, the colour stark against the browns and reds of the winter scenery. And among the flowers, cast pale by the diffused moonlight, was a square of paper that Neil teased out with his fingers—unfolding it slowly, revealing words pencilled upon its face.

And as the wind picked up outside, Neil read them to himself.

To he who saddles atop a storm which clouds yet never breaks,

Atop a wind which spills the scree, and yet no whisper makes,

The Earth stark 'pon his shoulders, making mirthless of a grin—

Tomorrow rides he wars-ward, to a prize he cannot win.

To he who holds within his chest a heart which cannot beat,

Who huddles 'round the flame of love, yet never feels its heat,

Who wants for wanting always, for the fruit that crowns his pool,

And yet the boughs evade him—and the gods cast him a fool.

To he who thrashes, 'neath the waves, whose last breath he thinks drawn,

Who knows not of the shore that he shall wake upon come dawn.

To him, I vow, that through the nights of winter, grey and grim,

As once he promised me before—so shall I fight for him.

Neil folded the paper, along its original creases—half once, half twice,

then half again. It felt heavy in his palm, too much weight to bear, and yet Neil found himself clinging to it. He was unable to divorce his eyes from the flowers, a miraculous growth from the wood and holly of his bird's nest. He fiddled with the folded-up page, then turned his head upwards. Upwards, towards the dark outside, out through the opened window.

Neil let the poem fall through his fingers, floating onto the floor. Let his hands trace the wood of his desk as he shivered. And numbly, with his head held high, his spirit far removed from his body—

Neil watched as the weather turned, white flakes spinning down from the heavens above.

Neil watched, with a long drawn breath, as it began to snow.

And all he could think—

All his mind could hold—

Was how terribly beautiful it all was.

I'm Waking Up And Now I Know

Chapter Summary

The day after the play.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He didn't need to open his eyes.

He just *knew*.

He knew it, as soon as light pulsed beyond his eyelids, as soon as the cold fanging into his limbs brought him back from the brink of slumber. The noise buzzing in his ears was *wrong*, the smell of the pillow beneath him was *wrong*, the feel of the mattress at his back was stiff and abrasive and *wrong*—crooked, misshapen, unaccustomed to the form of his body.

He wasn't home.

He was sleeping in some other boy's bed, under some other boy's blanket, the occupant of some other boy's room. As he tossed and turned, still somewhat delirious, he felt numbness where there should've been feeling; cramps where there should've been comfort; an erratic worry where there should've been hope.

Images from last night flashed before him, trickling in like snowmelt through the gaps of his skull. They collected into blurred vignettes, photographs burned at the edges, the pictures barely discernible; it had been after the performance, he had left with everyone for Welton, pulled along by Charlie and Knox and the rest—

Mr Keating had been there, he remembered, vaguely. He'd accompanied the boys to their cave in the woods, further joined by Ginny, Adam, and Mary—even Chris had been present, hurrying along with the rest, breath misted and teeth chattering. Guided by the moonlit brook beside them, they had weaved their way through the forest that night. Like a parade of faefolk, though without any of their merrymaking; the air had been dead, silent as the wind above, shuffling along like a funerary procession.

They had arrived sooner than he'd expected, the journey having felt shorter than normal. It was a small oddity that his brain had skipped over at the time, busied with settling against the stone as matches were pulled from their hiding place. The fire had been lit, casting shadows which danced on the walls behind each figure, long dark silhouettes that flickered with the tongues of flame. The poetry anthology had appeared in Charlie's hands, and the words had flowed from his mouth, and the meeting had begun.

Details came to mind of the evening, and yet… nothing specific, at the same time. He could recall that Mr. Keating had recited oh so very many verses, all of them impressively intricate for being memorised; and yet he could not repeat a single line from any of them, or name a single poet the man had quoted. He could pinpoint the feeling that seemed to grasp the other poets, that very last chance to mark your name in the Society's ledger, the fleeting finality of it all; but he was unable to relive any pieces, original or no, that they had shared that night. He could remember that Ginny had attempted to read, voice breaking halfway through, and that Chris had had to step in to assist her; but for the life of him, he could not describe what Adam or Mary had done, or if their voices were similarly spent by the performance before.

There had been laughter, he thought. Laughter, and applause, and that warmth far surpassing what a simple, physical fire could provide. Charlie and Knox had been at each other's side all throughout the walk before, and had held hands openly in the firelight during the meeting. The Captain had had that twinkle in his eye as he beamed at his students, the very same one he'd had when he'd first met them. Those who were new to the group had melded as if they'd always

belonged, as if the world had only been waiting for that very moment —for that calm, cloudless night, where they were all brought together in that single spot.

But something had been missing, the whole time. It had weighed in the back of his thoughts, heavy and insistent.

Someone, for that matter.

But just as the feeling had sunken in, the mood of the meeting turning dour, there had been a cough to his right. A clearing of the throat, beckoning everybody's attention towards the noise. And he had turned, and he had looked, and he had saw him. He'd seen…

…Todd?

Todd, standing up from off of the earthen floor, hair glowing golden from the tendrils of the fire. Circles of light sparkled in his pupils, silvery amidst the blue, like a moon and its mirror on the surface of a brook. His skin steamed against the arctic cold, shadowed and crimson and *radiant*, and he had a square of paper clasped in his hands. He had unfolded the page, once in half, twice in half, before reading off the words scrivened upon it.

But… his lips had moved silently, no sound spilling forth from them.

And Todd had turned to him when he'd finished, swallowed by a too-large duffel coat, flowers winding around his ears. At once, Todd's hands had been on his back, wrapped around his midsection, and yet Todd's face remained floating out in front of him. As everybody around them clapped, Todd had reached down towards him, fingers splayed and welcoming, lit as if a flashlight was pointed on them— pillars of shadow falling across his palm. The boy's smile had been

crooked, inviting, perfect.

And so he, of course, had reached up in turn. But his hands had moved through Todd's as if they were only apparitions, as if he were trying to hold onto smoke.

He'd blinked, nonplussed, before looking around at his friends, his fellow actors, poets, his *Captain*, whose applause had faded out not so long ago. Their faces had grown grim and gaunt and solemn, and when their hands were put together there was still no sound, nothing, just empty quiet mixing with the howling wind above—

Panicking, suddenly, he'd reached out desperately for Todd, for *any* of them, for the people he loved, for the people he wanted so terribly to stay with—

And he—

And he had found all of them, *all* of them—

All of them, out of reach.

His eyes flew open, heart hammering as he sat up in the bed. The blankets slithered off of him, puddling at his waist, allowing the brisk air to assault his bare chest. He was here, in that space that sounded, that smelt, that *felt* so wrong to him, a space not belonging to him, not anymore—

But… it *was* his, wasn't it? The pillow, the mattress, the room, *everything*—

It was all his.

It struck him, suddenly, as he crossed that threshold—stepping over from his previous reverie, back into reality. He clutched at his ribcage, blinking at the low light filtering in through the window, gaze falling atop the circlet of twigs and winterberries sat on the table below the sill. Goosebumps ran up his arms, a breath was knocked loose from his lungs, as the vignettes and their fantasy were revealed to be what they were. It came back in a sharp contrast, the truth of last night, replacing the last false vestiges of his dream—

There had been no meeting, none that he'd attended, anyway. He was *here*, in his childhood home, sleeping in the same bed he used to drool in as a toddler. He was *awake*, the world tipping sideways as he recovered his consciousness. He was—

God.

He was *alive*.

Neil Perry took a long, deep inhale, savouring the bite of cold in his lungs. Savouring the feeling, as his diaphragm ballooned, and the revelation dawned upon him—

It was morning.

He had made it.

He was *alive*.

Neil's fate awaited him down the stairs, to the left, and through the door of his father's study; it was the fate he'd chosen himself, and so there was little point in delaying it. He dressed quickly into his Welton clothes, an assembly he'd never thought would be *comforting* to wear but well, here he was. Though the shirt was wrinkled beyond belief, and the tie asphyxiating to a fault, to Neil they felt like charms—wards that he wore, granting some small semblance of hope. The duffel coat, especially, was a suit of armour when it came to the judgement that awaited him, a tiny act of rebellion, perhaps the very last he had in him. But it was all he had, and so he donned it determinedly. His father could strip away his life, tear him away from everything he loved; but Neil would not go along with it *willingly*.

He had decided that last night, in the very same room he now made his way down to.

He tried to ignore the Déjà vu swilling around his head as he made the descent, slinking down the stairs like he had a few hours before. He heard his mother working away in the kitchen, the kettle whistling on the stove, pots and pans clattering atop the counter. He heard his own footfall beneath him, soft and socked as he retraced his path. And just as he turned to his father's study, the door already open, from within he heard… voices. *Two* voices, echoing out into the hallway.

Neil paused, caught mid-step. He made his way forwards, up to the frame of the entryway, turning the corner blindly. He had meant only to peek, to sate his curiosity, unsure of what he expected.

It certainly wasn't the scene laid out before him.

Neil's father was sat behind his desk, ramrod straight in his seat,

fingers laced together out in front of him. Neil wondered if he knew that the drawer by his right foot, the only drawer with a lock on it, had been opened the previous eve; he didn't seem to, attention set solely upon the man he shared the room and conversation with. Well, up until Neil let out a shallow gasp, and their conversation was broken off as that man—sat in the same chair Neil had been in last night, though now positioned to face the desk—turned around to greet him.

"Ah, Neil! I'm so glad you could join us."

Neil stood, face blank and jaw hanging slightly ajar. He recovered just in time to stutter out a polite, if not entirely confused—

"Mr. Danburry?"

"*Dr*. Danburry," Neil's father corrected him, and for the first time since entering the room, Neil processed the expression on his father's face. It was firm, as it always was, the man never too far from his next scowl or scoff—but, to Neil's shock, the man was also *smiling*. The smile was tight, and grew tighter as he reproved his son, but the corners of his mouth were undeniably turned skyward.

Neil's head spun, helpless to think any further as he was directed to step forward. He was corralled by the snappy beckoning of his father to be beside Mr. Danburry's seat, and Neil snuck a glance at the man, terribly perplexed. The man only responded with an amused quirk of the lips, as if Neil could have guessed he'd be arriving.

"I and him have just been discussing your *future*, Neil."

Neil bristled, though he was far too bewildered to process his discomfort. He tucked his hands behind his back, noting the sickly-sweet tone of his father's voice. It meant, like it had *always* meant,

that he *better not mess this one up*. Neil gulped.

"What— If I may ask," he stammered out. "What does that entail?"

"Dr. Danburry, here," his father announced, as close to giddy as Neil had ever seen him. "Has very *kindly* offered his assistance. He arrived, earlier this morning, to inform me that he would be willing to speak not *only* with Welton higher-ups, but also colleagues at the *Harvard* medical school. *On your behalf*." His father grinned once again, as prim and as proper as his ironed suit, in Mr. Danburry's direction. Behind the frosty glint of his grey eyes was an undercurrent of glee— he was obviously pleased with himself.

"Yes," Mr. Danburry chimed in, twisting in his seat to face Neil. "I've been speaking with your father, Neil, and have been very impressed with your academic record— As well as your keen interest in the field." Neil's father practically *preened*, though his demeanour darkened slightly as Mr. Danburry continued. "And after seeing your passion all throughout the production of the play— And to witness that same passion fully realised, up on stage?" Mr. Danburry made a wistful face, palm hovering over his heart. "I decided that I would very much like to assist you in your endeavours to come."

Neil couldn't speak for a moment. Could barely *think*, he had to dig his fingernails into his wrist behind him to remember to breathe. His father's gaze, now schooled to be familiarly scrutinising, fell on him like a roof caving in.

"Dr. Danburry's offer is *overly* gracious," he touted, as his eye twitched, at which Neil almost flinched. "His connections will ensure scholarships, placements—possibly even entry level positions in the professional field."

Neil's mouth was dry with disbelief. He struggled for a response,

blurting out the only question he could think of.

"So I can stay?" he asked, tripping over his own words.

His father's jaw went taut, and Neil once again had to hold himself from jumping backwards. It had clearly not been the rousing enthusiasm he'd expected from his son's reaction, especially in front of their *decidedly important guest*. But while a storm fell over his father's face, Mr. Danburry only reached out an arm and patted Neil on the back.

"I'm afraid my influence only extends as far as Welton and Harvard," he explained, voice level. He moved his attention back on Neil's father, who immediately plastered on another over-polite smile. "Braden, or *any* military school, I'm afraid— Would be out of my jurisdiction."

It was all Neil could do not to let his feet fall out from beneath him. He took the flesh of the back of his hand between his thumb and forefinger, and pinched with all he could. The pain came back sharp, resonant, distinct from the sensations of his dream the evening prior— he was *awake*, he was *here*, this was *real*.

"Dr. Danburry has assured me that this is an *exclusive* offer," Neil's father warned, glaring at his son as soon as the other man's focus was elsewhere. There was a scold to his voice, stealing past the honeyed words, a not-so-subtle pressure being applied. "I trust that you will continue your studies with your *full*, undivided effort, as to not *waste* this man's overwhelming generosity."

Neil moved his weight from the ball of one foot, to the other. The question, once again, came out before he knew his lips were moving. "So I— So I can't continue acting…?" He knew he shouldn't have said it, should've have tempted fate so. But his heart wouldn't stop

screaming at him until he knew. Until he *knew*.

His father's nostrils flared, barely composing himself in front of his guest; he made to stand up out of his seat, but was cut off when Mr. Danburry answered himself.

"Of course, if you were to decide on an actor's pathway, I'm not sure how much assistance I could provide," he mused, knitting together his brows. "But… I don't see why you shouldn't nurture your passion for both medicine *and* the arts, alike. After all—" He wheeled around to Neil's father, who was surreptitiously lowering himself back down into his seat, determinedly keeping his mouth closed. "—I, myself, pursued theatre when I was your age. In *addition* to my study."

"You were an actor?" Neil asked. His father's eyes widened for a split second, caught off guard, a miniscule crack in his façade.

Mr. Danburry shot the man a wry smile, before facing Neil again. "Why, Neil," he crooned, voice cheerful. "Where do you *think* our young Virginia gets it from?" He chuckled, lightly, before bringing the conversation back to business. "From what I've seen of your records, you seem more than capable of achieving perfect grades—*while* indulging in other interests."

Like a dance, Neil and Mr. Danburry both smoothly turned on Neil's father in tandem. His father, for his credit, had the tight-lipped smile he'd been sporting before perfectly projected on his face—only Neil would be able to tell that he was clenching his teeth behind it, so hard that the enamel was close to splitting. It was almost remarkable how he managed to ground out his next sentence, spitting it through his gritted molars.

"Well— As long as Neil remains capable of that— And *vows* to put his academic achievement first—" Neil's father bored into Neil's soul,

demanding, threatening. Neil felt the urge to shrink back, but fought it. “Then. I. Suppose. There. Will. Be. No. Harm.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Danburry declared, clapping his hands together. “Then we’re all agreed.” He pushed himself out of his seat, offering his hand out to Neil. In the background, Neil’s father blinked, surprised at the sudden end to negotiations. Neil didn’t give him the chance to object; he shook the man’s hand like the lifeline it was, stern and steady, just as he’d been taught. “I look forward to seeing what you do in your future, Neil.”

“I look forward to it too,” Neil replied, as he realised that he was *smiling*. His lips pulled back, turned upwards at both ends, cutting into his cheeks. “And, uh— And thank you. I’m— *We’re* incredibly grateful for your assistance.” The sentence was practiced, rehearsed, a line that he’d been taught to spiel off to whatever authority figure his father had ordered him to charm. Here, though, in the dusty room Neil had almost lost *everything* in last night, his words were more genuine than he could ever express with speech alone.

“Now, with that sorted,” Neil’s father near *growled*, as his son and the other man parted. “I would very much like to speak with my son in private, if I may.” His father was trying terribly hard at keeping his words level, even, still scared that Mr. Danburry would withdraw.

“But of course,” Mr. Danburry said, resting an arm on the back of his chair. “Though… Neil, what’s the time?”

Neil looked down to his wristwatch, chipperly reporting that it was, in fact, “eight o’clock, sir.”

Mr. Danburry sucked in air through his teeth. “I’m afraid that if Neil doesn’t make it back to Welton in time, he’ll miss his first class. And seeing as I am going in that direction *regardless*—” Mr. Danburry

gestured vaguely. “I think it would be in our best interests if I took your son back to Welton myself. So that he may continue his studies, with no further delays.”

Neil’s father looked close to breaking. His face was white, the vein on his forehead was pulsing, and his hands on the clean, glossy surface of the desk were tensed against the wood. But Mr. Danburry didn’t back down, his calm air and reasonable suggestions a veritable *wall* in opposition to the other man’s requests.

“And it’s my understanding *you* need to go back to Chicago, right?” Mr. Danburry carried on, his voice no doubt infuriatingly sensible to Neil’s father’s ears. “I can’t imagine that Neil, nor *I*, would want to keep you.”

Neil’s father was fighting himself, that much was plain. He had both a contempt for the lack of control within the situation, and yet a greed for the status and wealth Mr. Danburry could provide. It was with his very last whit of self-control that he relented.

“Fine.” He spun on Neil. “But we *will* be having a phone call, about this.” Neil nodded, not daring to speak, and his father strained to make his voice presentable. “Now go and get your things— You will *not* keep a guest waiting.”

It took Neil a few seconds to process it.

But as soon as he did, he hopped to it happily, for once glad to obey his father’s demands.

He raced upstairs before his father could wring out a single syllable more, as his mind whirled with what had just happened. He gathered his things in this daze, only stopping briefly at his window to pick up

his crown. Still braided within its centre were the purple flowers, and after scouring the floor, Neil located the unfolded poem that had fallen from his fingers last night. Neil packed both into his bag, ensuring they were safe, before he slung it over his shoulder. He took another moment to check himself in the mirror, eyes ragged and doubt tugging at his grin, still not quite believing what he'd just heard. He half-expected to step out and have his father admit it was all false, that he was *still* to attend Braden, that another ten years of his life were to be pulled from him.

His eyes flitted towards his left temple, and the ghost-sensation of cold metal pressed against it wracked a shiver through his body.

But once he'd flown down the stairs two, three steps at a time, no falsities awaited him but his mother's hug and his father's well wishes. In front of Mr. Danburry, still standing sentry behind him, a rigid, choking grip on Neil's shoulder was all his father could give as admonishment before he was allowed to slip away. He was certain he'd hear it all over the wire, later, but for now he simply wasn't sure it was *real*.

He climbed into the passenger seat of Mr. Danburry's car, and watched out the window as his parent's house grew smaller and smaller. And for the first time since he'd put his father's pistol down, set it back into the drawer with shaking hands—

He found himself… hopeful.

He turned to Mr. Danburry, mouth still somewhat agape. It was then that he spotted the man offering out a brown-paper bag, wrapped around something that smelled delicious.

"Breakfast," he said, dropping it into Neil's hands. Neil pulled away the paper to see that he was holding a bread roll, still warm on his

skin. “From the bakery. Ginny insisted that I grab one for you, ensured me that they’re incredible.”

“I—” Neil couldn’t fathom what words could possibly convey what he wanted to convey. He tried, anyway. “I, uh— *Thank you*. For this, and for… everything.”

Mr. Danburry let out another soft chuckle, cruising along the snow-plowed suburbs. “No need to thank me, Neil,” he lied. “Really, I’m just the messenger.” He nodded down to the pastry. “For both *that* and all of the… stuff with your father. It was your friends, as well as my daughter, who came up with that last part— *They’re* the ones you should be thanking.”

“My friends…?” Neil echoed.

“Todd, mostly, from what I witnessed,” Mr. Danburry explained. He spoke lightly, voice chipper, as if he hadn’t just shifted the earth beneath Neil’s feet. “He called us on the phone last night, discussing something with Ginny for close to an hour— Then they both begged me to help, explaining your entire… *situation*, with your family.”

Neil didn’t know how to reply, and so he didn’t. Instead he bit into the bread roll, melting at the fluffy texture of it in his mouth, only then realising how hungry he truly was—he hadn’t had dinner the day before, neither had he had breakfast, and he’d barely touched the lunch set out by the play organisers. He took another ravenous bite as Mr. Danburry continued.

“Though, I should add— I did *mean* what I said, Neil. I’ve been thinking of providing my assistance, ever since we spoke that first dinner. And knowing how passionate you are, and seeing as you’re such good friends with my daughter…” He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. “I’ll gladly help you out, as best as I can.

It's not as though Chet is jumping at the opportunity to be a doctor."

Neil swallowed down a buttery mouthful. "So it's really— It's really no skin off your back?"

"None I'm not glad to give," Mr. Danburry replied, removing one hand off of his wheel to lay on Neil's shoulder. "I did tell you you had to *fight*, didn't I? I never said you'd have to do it alone." He turned his attention to the road, giving Neil one last pat. "I know— I know that you don't *want* to be a doctor, Neil. But this way, you can still pursue acting, at least *in part*. And hey, who knows?" Mr. Danburry shrugged, grinning out of the windscreen. "Maybe once you're off at college, striking out on your own… you'll be far enough away to choose differently."

Again, in lieu of an answer, Neil took another bite of his bread roll. He caught any flakes that fell from his mouth in the brown paper bag, remembering as he chewed.

"What if that day never comes?" he muttered, quietly, as if afraid the universe would hear him. "What if it's only… compromises, and half-measures, and— And sparse glimpses, from now on?"

Mr. Danburry hummed, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel once more. "Then you have to make the decision," he answered, voice growing graver. "Whether or not you can live with that."

Neil turned his face to his right, facing the scenery passing by. "And— And if you don't think you can…?"

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to live, regardless." Mr. Danburry had stopped tapping, though Neil still couldn't face him. "It's not a decision, not really— You *have* to live. You *have* to fight. It's… It's the

most important thing in the world."

"Is that really how it is?"

"Not really." Outside, the trees and houses whipping past were becoming more and more familiar. "But it's what you have to tell yourself. That tomorrow will be different. That tomorrow will be better. That you have to be there, to know."

"Thank you," Neil said, again, the words fogging up against the glass of the car window. He moved his neck to his left, watching Mr. Danburry as he drove. The man was focused on the road, but he seemed to relax as Neil added, "I'll remember that, s— *Joe*."

"I'm happy to hear that." Mr. Danburry went back to smiling, as he added, "And remember, our door is always open."

Neil took yet another bite of his bread roll. It was warm as he chewed, as he swallowed, and that warmth spread through his whole body.

"Speaking of which— Would you mind if we stopped there on our way to Welton? Ginny would probably appreciate seeing you were okay."

Neil nodded, happily. He realised his throat was wet, tears beginning to prick in his eyes, and so he swallowed and tried looking elsewhere. He remained silent as the town came into view, but it was a comfortable silence.

Neil realised, quite suddenly, how content he was. And why shouldn't he be?

After all, he was going home.

Neil knocked at the whitewashed door as he'd always done it; thrice, sharply and evenly, *assertive but not insistent*. From behind him, through the driver side window, Mr. Danburry shot him a thumbs up, which Neil returned. He spun back on the door.

And decided *ah, to hell with it*.

He beat at the door like it was dough being kneaded, like he was whaling on a boxer's bag, like it was the hammering of his heart within his chest as he waited atop the doormat—

His fists connected with empty air as the door was pulled open, revealing a righteously cross Ginny. "You better have a *damn* good reason to be— *Neil!*" Her face changed immediately, splitting open into a wide, relieved grin.

And that was all the warning that Neil received before she barrelled into him, wrestling him into an embrace while the door was still swinging open on its hinges. Neil struggled to breathe, but from the tight grip Ginny held on his arms he could tell that she had *needed* this. He could barely even hear the voice ring out, over her shoulder, from the room adjoining the hallway—

"Neil's here?"

Neil perked up at the sound, seeing Adam and Mary both emerging

from the living room. Their expressions matched Ginny's, the deep-set lines of worry carved into their faces finally alleviated. Neil beamed at the both of them, and Ginny released him just in time for him to be crushed by Adam pulling him in.

"I *told* you he'd be fine," Mary chided, though her slightly wobbly pitch betrayed her. And when it was her turn to hold him, and she held him just as fast as the others, he could feel where she'd wiped the wetness off of her face only moments before.

Neil pulled back afterwards, facing the three. "So, uh… what are you guys doing here?"

At that, all three actors began talking at once, their great amount of practice of reading line after line clearly having gone to waste. Only after they'd pulled Neil over to the couches—"*only for a second, really, my father can wait,*"—did they manage to organise themselves into some sort of script, relaying the evening's events. They told Neil of the sombre mood left in the wake of his departure, of no one daring to utter a word as he'd been driven away. All of them had been imagining the same thing, though.

"It was Todd, in the end, who said something," Adam filled in, sitting opposite Neil, closest to the fire. "He, us, and your friends all brainstormed, out on that pavement— But no one could come up with anything. We had all just… *left*, not thinking that anything could be done."

"Except Todd didn't give up, clearly," Ginny supplied, sitting beside Neil. She had her legs crossed, nudging his knee with her foot. "He called us up, long after we'd gotten home, to explain his idea. It's how we ended up sending my father over there, with all of his offers— Which*, by the way*, he has been going on about for *ages*." She groaned, throwing her head back on the couch cushion. "At least his endless indecision finally paid off— This morning proved an *excellent* time to ambush your father with them."

“Ginny called us up, told us about it early this morning,” Mary piped up, mirroring Ginny, next to Adam. She had a mug of tea in her hands, with two matching ones set out on a tray on the coffee table, both completely drained. “We came over for support. We were— Well, *some* of us were worried, but… I mean, from the fact you’re *here*…” Mary took a sip, exchanging looks between the other two. “It did… *work*, right?”

Neil broke into a grin as he nodded. He relaxed into the heat of the fireplace as he told his side of the story, some careful omissions being made—he would fill them in on the full details if and when he desired; and all he knew was that today, despite its dire beginnings, was a *happy* day.

Today was the time for the abridged version, for the version where he had only felt as if he hadn’t wanted to wake up the next morning. He didn’t say how far he went, nor how close he’d been; he said only that as he had been about to go to sleep, hopeless and cold in a room he did not specify, and that he’d thought on everyone and everything he was to lose.

And had decided to try, to *fight*, just once more in the morning.

And if not that, then every morning thereafter.

And then he had gone to bed, to wake up to his father and Mr. Danburry in the study, discussing his future. *That* part, at least, he could tell in full.

“Thank you all, by the way,” Neil stated. “I really—”

“Thank *Todd*,” Ginny interrupted, so much like her father. Adam and Mary both murmured their agreements, as she carried on. “We were all wanting to help, but Todd— He was the one who was willing to speak up. *He* was the one who refused to let go, who couldn’t even sleep without doing *something*.” Ginny nudged Neil again, smiling knowingly. “I’ve never heard him so fired up.”

Neil felt his heart leap, roses blooming in his ribs. “I’ll have to— I’ll have to thank him, then,” he sighed, already knowing that whatever he said wouldn’t be enough. That knowledge wasn’t sufficient to discourage him, however, or even to slightly diminish his want, his *need* to see the other boy. Especially not after all that he’d heard that morning, from everyone else. “English is first this morning, again, perhaps I could skip it to go to Ridgeway, again…”

Ginny, Adam, and Mary all shared notably conspiratorial looks, all appearing privy to a secret Neil wasn’t in on. Mary took a sip from her mug to try and cover it, but the way her eyes fluttered gave it away.

“What…?”

“Well, you see—” Adam began.

“He might be closer than you think,” Mary added, before turning back to her tea.

Neil looked around the space, as if Todd was about to pop out from the kitchen, or run down the stairs from Ginny’s room, or reveal himself as having hidden beneath the coffee table. Neil half expected to look over at the Persian and see him lying there, surrounded by open books, looking up at Neil as he finally noticed him.

“Where— Where is he?” Neil inquired, trying and failing to keep his

voice from sounding overeager.

“Well, last night he was obviously distraught,” Ginny said, as she bounced her stockinged foot on the cushioning.

“And after we spoke on what to do, to no avail, outside the theatre…” Mary continued. “He was approached… by your Welton friends.”

“They were gathering around him, inviting him back with them, saying they would take care of him from there…” Adam appended. “Ginny naturally fought them on that, but they did seem genuine, and Todd seemed to trust them…”

“They said that they were having a *meeting*, or something or other,” Ginny elaborated, unimpressed. “It nearly cheered Todd up, though, so I let them go. Your English teacher, especially, seemed keen to meet him, and I’ve only heard terrific things about him, so—”

“So they left, and we left, and that was the end of it,” Mary concluded.

“Until the phone call, of course,” Adam jutted in.

“Yes, the phone call!” Mary set her mug down with a clatter, flapping her hands as she turned to Ginny. “The very *late* phone call, with—”

“With *voices* in the background,” Ginny finished, leaning her had further back as she eyed Neil. “Voices I recognised from that morning, in a staticky mess I recognised from previous calls.”

Neil nearly leapt to his feet, swivelling between his friends' faces as they watched the realisation dawn on his. "Wait," he said, pushing his fringe up. "Wait, wait, wait— Are you— Are you saying—"

A polite honk sounded out from the car still standing in the drive, and Neil checked the clock hung above the mantlepiece. Within its golden frame, gilded hands pointed to embossed roman numerals—ticking over each minute a little too fast. Below it, Ginny grinned like a Cheshire.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," she put forth. "Neil— Todd's at *Welton*."

After everything that the man had done for him, *especially* everything that very morning, the last thing Neil wanted to do was to ask anything more from Joe Danburry—least of all some petulant, inessential request such as to *drive faster*.

He didn't need to, though. The man seemed to be able to read the nervous skitter Neil moved with down the garden path, the way that he kept glancing down at his wristwatch. He could likely *hear* Neil's pulse, like a chisel etching away at the marble of his patience, blood pumping away in his ears.

Neil was squirming as the vehicle rolled through the huge gates of Welton, though he did his best to sit still as a statue as Mr. Danburry's car puttered up the hill. He even managed to keep himself collected as they parked beside the huge, brick building of the school, and Neil fetched his items from where they'd been stored in the backseat. He said his goodbyes to Mr. Danburry, unable to help himself from thanking him for the nth time; it wasn't enough (and it likely would *never* be enough), but Neil now believed he had the time to make up for it.

He'd seen so much of the man the past few months, every time he went over to the Danburry's. Even with no rehearsals on the horizon, Neil knew that was unlike to change—his number of visits was set to increase, if anything. He had heard the man's offer, and would be glad to take him up on it.

Neil shouldered his satchel with a toss, his crown clasped in his other hand as he forced his steps to slow through Welton's empty, dust-choked halls. Checking his watch, he saw that it was time for the morning meal; he oh-so patiently paced towards the dining hall, peeking his head through before navigating between the benches. The boys had only just sat down, plates empty, chatter still humming in the air.

Curiously, when Neil found the table he and his friends usually occupied, he found it relatively abandoned—only a handful of students were there, including Stick and Spaz. The two were conversing quietly, their colloquy held in suspicious, hushed whispers, though it was brought to a halt as soon as they spotted Neil.

"Neil!" Stick exclaimed, pleasantly surprised. "We were just— We didn't think you were coming in today."

"Oh," Neil replied. "What— What made you think that…?"

"Charlie and that said you might not be," Spaz interjected. "They came back late without you, said that you went home for a bit." The boy fixed where his glasses at on his face. "Said you might *stay* home, for a bit."

"*Oh.*" Neil's grip on his crown fastened, imperceptibly—or at least, he *hoped* it was imperceptible. "And where are… Charlie and *that*…

now?”

“Still upstairs, most like,” Stick offered. “I saw Pitts and Meeks sneaking into the cloakroom, earlier, perhaps they’re there…?”

Neil cut him off, abruptly thanking the two for the information before setting off upstairs. His footfall was ever-so-slightly quickened now, just a fraction more up-tempo, but it was all Neil could do not to sprint up the stairwell. He arrived to the door of the cloakroom, pulled it open, and entered to find—

Five pairs of eyes, shooting up towards him.

Two stacked atop the piles of luggage, one sat higher up the heap to match the other’s height. Two at the back of the room, resting atop some draped-over furniture, close enough that the cigarette smoke of one twisted around the form of the other. And lastly, there was one leaning against the shelf closest to the entryway, arms crossed stiffly over its attached front.

All shot open at once, swiftly followed by a chorus of shouts. Each pair scrambled to their feet, crowding around Neil, who could only laugh as the boys—the *poets*—surrounded him from all sides.

“Neil!” Charlie chirped, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “You’re— You’re okay!”

“Yes, yes, I am,” Neil responded, grinning as the poets fussed around him, looking as if they’d seen a ghost, which—

Which Neil didn’t want to consider the implications of, at the present

moment.

"And you're *staying,* aren't you?"

"Yes," Neil answered, to which the poets all appropriately *yawped*.

Knox exhaled, right by his ear. "Thank *God*. We thought your father would've—"

"—he looked so *angry*, last night—" Meeks recalled.

"And then you both drove off, without explanation…?" Pitts trailed off, scratching at the back of his neck.

"You should've seen Todd's face, Neil, he looked ready to—" Cameron commented.

Neil looked up sharply—sharply enough to put the other poet's questions to the side. "Look, I'll tell you all about it later," he promised, as the room fell silent. "But *Todd*, he's… he's *here*, isn't he?" Urgency crept into his voice, no matter how hard he tried to resist it. "I, uh… I need to speak with him."

"I thought you might," Charlie teased, before moving over to the door. He motioned out, into the hallway, and winked. "Come on. We'll go see him now."

And with that, Neil was led, strangely enough, to the entrance to his own dorm room. Charlie pushed open the door a sliver, poking his

head in, before re-emerging with a sly, but mirthful, look on his face.

“He’s still there,” he whispered.

“In… there?” Neil queried.

“It was late,” Knox explained, volume matching Charlie’s. “He needed a place to sleep.”

“Don’t worry,” Meeks added. “Cameron convinced your roommate to swap with Knox for the night. Wasn’t happy about it, especially not since he had to get woken up for it—"

“But he came around,” Pitts supplied.

“*Eventually*,” Cameron said, exasperated.

Neil stared at the doorknob Charlie had just released, brass and polished and winking in the sun. He looked back up to his friends, who all waved him on, but stayed firmly planted where they were. Charlie caught the flash of hesitance on Neil’s face, clicked his tongue, and began to pull the group back.

“We should be getting downstairs, now,” Knox said, lingering as the other poets were hounded down the hallway by Charlie, sneaking glances behind them. “We’ll, uh— We’ll leave you to it.”

“Wait,” Neil breathed, chewing at the flesh of his cheek; for as impatient as he’d been anticipating it, now that the moment was *here*,

he found himself… caught unawares, by all of it. It was a feeling he'd been taught well, by now, but it still gave him some pause. "What… What do I do? What do I *say*?"

Knox chuckled as he followed the rest of the boys, throwing his answer over his shoulder. "Just wake him up," he instructed, disappearing from view. "And tell him the good news."

Neil turned back to the door as Knox's footsteps faded down the distance of the corridor. He took a deep breath in before reaching out, turning the knob, stepping into his own room—somehow feeling as if he were trespassing, despite it being where he'd stayed and slept and *lived* for some any nights.

When he finally walked in, he did so as quietly as possible.

It was all as Neil remembered it to be, every other morning: dust motes floating lazily by the window, hovering in the dawnlit air; the ever-present whirring of the radiator, humming from the pipes within the walls; papers and pens where he'd sit at his desk, arranged as they always were atop it. He fell back against the door, closing it quietly, as he took in the one glaring difference—outlined beneath the covers of his bed, a peaceful expression on his face. Like the smoothness of freshly fallen snow, unbroken by any wayward footsteps.

Neil approached, kneeling beside his own bed, wincing slightly as the floorboards squeaked. Todd's eyelids tensed, the cadence of his breaths stammering, before leveling out once more. Neil let himself enjoy, for however long he allowed himself to, the tranquillity of it all. Something in his chest undug itself, an ache finally loosening, a kink at last coming undone.

He lofted his arm, so very slowly, moving as if through the filament of a dream—which he thought it just might be, up until the point where

he landed his palm onto Todd's shoulders. And it all felt so *real*, then, the scratch of cloth tangible and textured beneath his fingers, Todd's drowsy, whistly huff at the contact, which became a small rush of air against the naked skin of Neil's wrist. The weight of his hand there, really *there*, playing across the blanket's folds.

"Todd?" Neil, as gently as he could, shook Todd's figure awake—push, and pull, and push, and pull, like the moon with the ocean's tides. "*Todd*."

Todd, in his half-conscious stupor, tried to shrug the other boy off. "G-Go away, Knox," he slurred, voice thick with sleep.

Neil only kept pushing, pulling, eventually causing Todd to swat at him before rolling back over. Or, at least, attempting to, before Neil drew him back. The boy had his eyes screwed shut, reluctance lining his face, the tension blending in with the pillow marks printed on his cheeks.

"Kn-Knox, I don't— *Let me b-be*."

"Todd, *Todd*," Neil tried once more, smiling as he said it.

Todd scrunched up his nose, sitting himself up, supporting himself by his outstretched hands behind him. He slowly fluttered open his eyes, rubbing at them once his senses returned to him. Neil could see when the recognition first clicked, when the other boy's pupils widened and his breath hitched.

"Todd," Neil repeated. "It's— It's *me*."

“*Neil.*” Todd breathed the word like a prayer, blanket falling from him as he sat up straighter. He was wearing the same shirt as he had last night, though far more rumpled now than it had been. He reached out with a hand, shivering in the air. “Are— Are y-you…?”

And Neil—

Neil decided that he had waited long *enough*.

He launched himself at Todd, knocking him over on the mattress. The bedsprings cried out as the other boy yelped, all the while Neil laughed like he’d never laughed before. “It’s *me*,” he said, again, a reassurance as much to himself as it was to Todd. “It’s *me*. I’m here, I’m— I’m *real*. It’s me, Todd.”

Todd laughed along as Neil tackled him onto his side, arms wrapped around his toasty body, face buried in the crook of where his neck met his shoulder. It sounded slightly hysterical, ringing out over the empty dormitories, and Neil couldn’t tell where his merriment ended and Todd’s began. He decided that he preferred it that way.

“Neil, *Neil*,” Todd groaned, as Neil twined his hands tighter and tighter around him. “I’m— I’m all g-gross, and th-these clothes… they’re all s-sweaty, and snotty, and—”

“I don’t care,” Neil mumbled into the boy’s collar, warm skin pushed up against the left side of his face. He pulled himself away, only a few inches, only just enough to take in Todd’s expression. The surprise and shock had escaped him, leaving only unadulterated *joy*. He had crow’s feet about his eyes, smile-lines framing his mouth, and his arms were laced around Neil just as firmly as Neil had his around him.

“I h-had a dream,” Todd muttered.

“About what?” Neil moved his hands so that his fingers were interwoven with Todd’s; his digits were cold from the outside, while Todd’s were flushed with heat.

“About you.” Todd blinked a couple times, staring down at where they were linked atop the thoroughly messed-up sheets. “We w-were… We were under that b-bridge, again. F-From my birthday. It was like that, but wh-when you handed me the desk set— I— I threw it, but when I th-threw it, you went along with it.” Todd blinked once more, and Neil realised that there were tears forming on the other boy’s lash lines. “You f-floated away, and I— I never s-saw you again.”

Neil tightened his grip on Todd. “That didn’t happen, Todd,” he insisted, recalling his own visions from the night before. Of the meeting that never happened, of the hands that pulled out of reach, of the people and places he had almost lost, forever. “It *didn’t*. It wasn’t real, it never was— I’m here, Todd, I’m *here*.”

“And…” The apple of Todd’s throat bobbed as he gulped. “And you’re h-here to *stay*, right?”

“Yes, Todd, *yes*.” Neil leant forward, letting his forehead bump against Todd’s. “I’m here to say. Because of *you*.”

Neil’s face hurt from smiling, his voice from laughing; a tear fell down Todd’s cheek, dew-like in the sun, and Neil could feel his own eyes welling up. He disentangled their hands so that he could bring his up to Todd’s chin, cupping it as he thumbed away his tear.

“A-Always?” Todd whispered, the question ghosting across Neil’s lips.

“Yes, Todd,” he answered, angling the other boy’s mouth up, pressing his lips to his. They struggled with the kiss, as both of them were so helplessly grinning; their teeth clacked against each other, Todd was fumbling with Neil’s tie, and they both devolved into another bout of laughter—if ever they had ceased it in the first place. It was a struggle, and like every moment with the other boy, it was *perfect*.

Neil pulled back one final time, falling to his haunches on the mattress. Todd peered up at him, irises shining, hair frazzled, mouth a mess. Neil knew that he wasn’t much better; his perfect locks sticking up wherever they pleased, his cheeks wet with tears, and his tie picked loose and unravelling at the knot.

He felt, finally, like he could breathe.

“Always, Todd,” he promised. He licked his lips, pawing at the wetness of his face.

“Always,” Todd promised back.

Neil collapsed against the other boy, in the calm of his room, atop the ruin of his bed, hopelessly happy.

And he said it again, just because he could.

Just because this time, he believed it would be true.

And if it wasn’t—

He would make it so.

"*Always*."

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand that's a wrap! Kind of. Not really. I still have an epilogue that should be coming out next week. But then. THEN. Then it will be a wrap. I'm sorry for what I did last chapter. But also not. Hopefully I've made it up to you with this one :)
I'll save most of my notes for when I actually, 100% true this time, finish with the epilogue, but I just wanted to thank you all so much for reading and commenting and kudosing <3 This has been such a wonderful and fun experience for me and I hope you've enjoyed this fic. And continue enjoying it. Again, epilogue, but that will be relatively short. Anyways.
See you in a week!

Charm (Epilogue)

Chapter Summary

An epilogue.

“Come on! Come on!”

Todd giggled as Neil dragged him along, pulling him by their enjoined hands. He sobered up quickly, however, as his shoe caught a root, and he nearly tripped over into the slush and soggy soil.

“Neil! Slow *down*!” Todd panted, no heat to his voice.

“But it’s right *here*! Come on!”

It was New Year’s Day, and only the morning of, but to Neil it may as well have been the middle of summer. Rays of sunlight flitted between the trees, and—despite the snowy forest floor, whipping away underfoot as they ran—Neil felt warm wrapped up in his duffel coat, unbothered by the cold. And from the flush riding high on Todd’s cheeks, pushed up by his smile, Neil could tell that the other boy felt the same.

“Don’t worry, Todd,” Neil assured him, tugging on the other boy’s hand once more. “I’ll catch you if you fall.” He cast a glance over his shoulder, seeing Todd grinning dizzily up at him.

“I know,” the boy replied, not a modicum of worry to his words. The pair then continued their trek, powder packed beneath them and branches barely swaying above them. It was a clear, windless winter day, and it was only the two of them in the entire world.

Neil kept the babble of the stream to their side, allowing to guide them as it had so many nights before. He hardly needed the instructions anymore, and after all the times they'd visited the cave over the break, Todd no longer needed them either. Still, it was familiar, and cozy, and it brought them to the hole in the hill all the same. It wasn't their intended destination, but it never hurt to stop by—which they did, assuring all was in order within. The stolen rug was still rolled up in the corner, laid out to dry every now and then so that it wouldn't mould; the firewood was still stacked against the farthest wall, kept away from the moisture, so that it was always ready to be set alight; and the god was still sat on its stepladder pedestal, watching over its sanctuary, even if most of the society's members were away on holiday.

Charlie was back with his family, apparently meeting some extended relatives from overseas. No doubt he'd come back once the break had ended, whining about being bored to death by his endless supply of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Meeks, Pitts, and Cameron had all been sent back home to do something similar, enjoying their time off school in their childhood houses. Knox was off travelling with his parents in Europe, a trip Neil had heard extensively about—from Charlie, who'd been bemoaning the difference in time zones and the cost of transatlantic calls. Even Neil's other friends were away; Adam was somewhere in Oregon if his last postcard was to be believed, and Mary had returned home like the majority of the other girls at Henley. She, though, lived relatively close to the town, and had sometimes bussed in to meet them all.

All being Neil, and Todd, and Ginny, the first two of which—upon seeing that their routinely maintenance had been accomplished—continued their way up the brook, following the shimmering water with their arms looped together. It took them climbing over the cave's short hill, and a brief traipse through some muddy underbrush, but eventually they came upon what they'd been looking for. What Neil had promised to show Todd, all those many, many nights ago.

"Well," Neil remarked, swinging out his hand. "What did I say, Todd?"

Todd pursed his lips, standing so close to the other boy that their shoulders brushed. “You were right,” he conceded, a teasing lilt to his voice. “It certainly is… not really a waterfall.”

Neil balked, shoving at Todd, who shoved back, cackling. They pushed at each other for a minute before they both almost stumbled into that underbrush they’d just traipsed through—calling a truce as they approached the not-waterfall, exploring it closer. The light bursting through the boughs above glistened in its rushes, flowing forth from a mound as tall as Neil, before breaking halfway down. It spilled onto a ledge of earth that jutted out at Todd’s waist height, splitting into several smaller not-waterfall’s before pooling back together at the boy’s feet. Just behind the gush of it, where the sun could not reach its radiance, fingers of ice dangled down from the stone, smooth and dripping and blue-white.

Neil turned to his side to see Todd, who despite his earlier dismissal was staring in silent rapture at the sight before them. Neil was still, after so many days spent together, amazed at his fortune—both amazed and grateful, for the gift of the boy’s company.

Neil had thought the break would be lonely, back when he’d been saying his goodbyes to his friends. After the chaos of midyear tests had settled, and everybody had begun being ferried home for Christmas, he’d asked to be allowed to stay at Welton for the break. His father had accepted once he’d heard that it’d practically be a graveyard, with only a handful of souls to haunt its dining hall every meal. Neil had been glad not to be forced home, especially not with how his last visit had turned out—but it still felt somewhat like trading one abyss for another. Even *Mr. Keating* had gone back to England, to reunite with his dear wife, leaving the only staff to be cooks and teachers Neil hadn’t ever really met.

He'd known that he’d have Ginny, her house just a brief bike ride away; but that was cold comfort, considering that Neil would spend most of his time at Welton anyhow. The snow had been falling heavier

and heavier, and as the year winded down the roads were becoming less and less accommodating. Neil had felt himself pulling in, pulling away, actually fetching out the study he'd promised his father he'd do and *actually doing it*.

All until Todd had knocked at his dorm door, ungloved knuckles rapping sharply on the wood.

"*I'm staying,*" had been all he'd said, falling forward into Neil's heated room. Neil had caught him, cursing when he realised the boy was positively *freezing*, before then pushing him over near the radiator.

"*You're staying?*" Neil had repeated. "*But you said your family was—*"

"*—going away?*" Todd had swallowed, guilt in his posture as he settled atop the now derelict surface of Neil's roommate's bed. "*They, uh, s-still are…*"

Neil had fallen next to him, resting his elbow on the boy's shoulder. It had felt just like it had the first time—*correct*, no other way to put it, his joint fitting like a key into a lock. "*Todd, you didn't…*"

"*They d-didn't want m-me there, anyway,*" Todd had defended, toeing off his shoes and pulling his feet up on the bed. He'd brought his knees up to his chest, and Neil realised the boy had only had a sweater on as protection against the arctic conditions outside. "*Only J-Jeff wanted me there, and h-he could see how much I w-wanted to stay.*"

"*But you said they wouldn't trust you with the house.*" Neil had stood, walking to his roommate's now nearly empty wardrobe—from it he'd procured the bed's old blankets, and he wandered back over to see Todd nodding. Neil had then responded by dropping the sheets atop Todd's trembling form, burying him. "*So where will you…?*"

Todd had emerged out of the pile of bedding, grinning. And Neil had realised.

"*Oh.* Oh." Neil had grabbed the blankets again, at that, and thrown it over Todd, burying him anew. "*When I said that, Todd, I hadn't been— I hadn't thought it all through, yet.*"

Todd's answer had come muffled through the blankets. Neil had sighed and dived under, meeting Todd in their own little pocket of warmth amidst the cold. Todd's teeth had still been chattering, but his words had come out clear and concise.

"*The Danburry's offered me a place,*" he'd laid out. "*If you don't want to —*"

"*Of course I want to, Todd*," Neil had interrupted. "*I'm just thinking—*" And Neil *had* thought. Had considered it, had *been* considering it ever since he'd first made the offer to an, at first, reluctant Todd. But Todd then, in the half-light through the translucent blankets, had none of the doubt he'd had before. He'd been *willing*, Neil could see it in his eyes. "*If… If you've changed your mind, Todd, then it* should *work… We'd just need a Welton uniform.*"

"*I have Jeffrey's old one,*" Todd had offered. "*I can go grab it, before the rest leave.*"

Neil's heart had picked up, a smile blooming on his face. "*That's… That's sorted then. I don't see any reason why you can't stay here.*"

It had been a truly *fantastical* idea when he'd first conjured it, had first volunteered it to Todd. He certainly hadn't expected the boy to take it

up, knowing his nervousness when it came to allowing himself happiness—especially when that happiness came with any sort of risk. But from what Neil had witnessed, those first few days of the break, they had never needed to worry over that risk in the first place. The remaining staff turned out to not care all that much about which boys were sat in the dining hall each meal, and didn't seem to notice if the numbers were one or so greater than on their list.

"*It'll b-be like we're roommates,*" Todd had whispered, warming the air between them. Neil had laughed as he'd pulled them close, twisted under the weight of the blankets.

"*It'll be like we're roommates,*" Neil had whispered back.

So that was how Neil had ended up with Todd at his side, practically every hour of the day. He'd had a bag already packed for his family's Boston trip, down to see Jeffrey's apartment near Harvard, and it hadn't been terribly difficult sneaking it up to his room through the empty halls of the school. Getting Todd dressed into his older brother's uniform, the fit of it running slightly too large, was simple enough, and when they'd gone down for lunch that day none of the cooks nor teachers had batted an eye—one asked if Todd had always been there, and Neil had lied that he'd had to come back for the break after family plans had fallen through. The teacher had nodded, and carried on, none the wiser.

From then on, Neil had woken up every morning to the gentle in-and-out of Todd's breath, not quite believing it was real. He'd arise from bed early, a few minutes shy of dawn, just to take in the sight of Todd asleep on the newly-arranged bed, reassuring himself that the boy was truly *there*. Eventually, Todd would wake, and they'd while away the time doing as they liked; just the two of them, taking tours through the library and climbing the stairs to the roof. Every now and then walking out to the cave in the woods, or to the Danburry's house in the town, or simply wherever they pleased.

Which, right now, was back through the forest in the direction of Neil's dorm. *Their* dorm, for the precious few days they had left before Todd's parents returned, followed shortly by the beginning of the school term. All coming sooner than Neil would like, which didn't say much. As greatly as Neil missed his friends, the winter break could last a year like this and he would never tire of it, would regret to see it ending even after all then.

Alas, time had a talent for slipping through fingers—Neil was more aware of that than anyone else.

"We should probably head back," he suggested, taking one last look over the water and its lustre. They'd follow its flow back out of the woods, trailing beside it, retracing their steps.

"Let's," Todd agreed, bumping Neil's shoulder before the two set back —at a reasonable pace this time, strolling leisurely back down the path. Neil was winded, though he wouldn't admit it, instead taking it as an excuse to enjoy what little of the winter break remained. The sky was shining, the sun dappled on his face, and he had a boy that he loved beside him. How *couldn't* he be happy?

"Is there anything else we still need to do?" he pondered aloud.

Todd laughed, and it fogged over in the air. "We'll h-have time after this, Neil. We're in no rush."

"I know, I know," Neil responded. "But— We should still make the most of this. Us, *here*."

Todd pulled his arm out—the one not attached to Neil's—and placed a studious fist beneath his chin. "In that c-case… you're still yet to tell me what h-happened with Knox and Charlie."

“I haven’t told you already?”

“You haven’t,” Todd affirmed. “You told Ginny, because she pounced on you *instantly*, but… I’d been in the other room, with J-Joe.”

Neil frowned, brow creasing. “That can’t be true… really?” He looked over at Todd, who nodded. “I’m sorry then, Todd. Though you weren’t missing out on much, really—”

Neil had pulled aside Charlie just before their last meeting, the one to send off the year before the break hit and every poet scattered to the winds. He’d been about to fetch Todd, his bike already hidden out beneath the rowing shed like last time, when he’d spotted Charlie leaving the dining hall early. Neil had given chase, cornering him in his room, and then pressed the other boy for answers—Charlie had proved reluctant, refusing to tell Neil *anything*. He’d taunted him, saying that what he did with Knox was none of Neil’s business. He’d added with a devilish smirk that there was absolutely *nothing* Neil could do about it.

After the meeting Neil had pulled aside Knox, who had then told him everything immediately.

“*After you left that morning, after Charlie had just hit Chet— I went to check on him.*” Knox had rolled the cigarette in his fingers, as he and Neil had once again found themselves out on the dock. They’d soon have to join the other boys indoors, but for the moment, they’d been alone. “*He was… confused, at first, as to why I was helping him. Said as much, too*.” Knox had chuckled, and it’d been a genuine, floating thing. “*I, uh… I went silent for a bit, was busy fussing over his hand. It had some of Chet’s blood on it, and he’d wiped it on his shirt, so I had to take him back to his room—*”

"*You took him back to his* room?" Neil had inquired, just a little ribbingly. It had worked, making Knox stutter over his next few sentences.

"*I— I didn't mean it like* that! *I just— I just, uh— He needed a new shirt! I wasn't… thinking entirely straight.*" Knox had raised one of hands, placing it on the back of his neck. "*I didn't get very far— I'd barely closed the door before he was on me, demanding to know why I was doing all this, why I cared so much.*"

"*And did you provide him any answers?*" Even under the pale moonlight, Neil had been able to see how Knox had blushed.

"*I— I think I made it pretty obvious.*"

Neil had made sure not to laugh, primarily because he'd known he was no better with Todd. "*And after you'd… 'made it obvious'… what then?*"

"*What happened next,*" Knox had narrated, "*wasn't terribly interesting. We sat, and talked, and called each other stupid. It was between classes, so we didn't have that much time. I, uh, finally admitted to him— I finally admitted that my poem, the one from English class…?*"

"*The one about autumn leaves…?*"

"*Yes, that one… I admitted that I wrote it about him, as if it wasn't obvious.*" Knox had blown out smoke, which had wandered and dissipated over the lake. "*He whooped like an idiot, saying he knew it all along. I think Cameron knocked after that, telling us to hurry up, that we were needed in chemistry. Charlie told him to get lost.*"

"*And… since that day?*" Neil had pushed.

Knox had looked up, the orange ring of his cigarette stark against the gloom. It had illuminated his teeth as he'd grinned, plucking it from between his canines and offering it to Neil. "*Since then, we've… I'm not sure how to put it. We talk more easily now, steal moments when no one's looking, just… enjoy existing around each other. We're making up for lost time, really. You get it.*"

Neil had had no choice but to smile in turn, reaching out to accept the smoke from the other boy. "*I get it.*" Then he'd given the cigarette back, and they'd enjoyed the quiet a little longer before heading in.

"You never told me Knox wrote a poem," Todd remarked, as the trees began to thin around them. So, too, did the snow on the ground, growing shallower and shallower as more sun shone through the emptied foliage above.

"A damn good one, too," Neil replied. "I'll have to see if I can convince him to read it out at the next meeting. It's hardly fair that we've all heard it but you."

Todd hummed under his misted breath as they emerged out of the forest, walking shoulder-to-shoulder. They were hidden from Welton proper by the slope of the hill, as they walked down towards the lake —so they were free to keep their fingers interlocked, tucked together comfortably down by their sides.

They stopped just shy of the water, lapping gently against the wood of the dock, and took in the scenery around them; the landscape painted with white, the expanse of the lake rolling out towards the shore, lined with distant, winding trees. Neil sighed, long and content, at *all of it*.

He felt his heart leap, beginning to race—but not from any mixture of dread, or doubt, or despair. It was all anticipation, all excitement, all awe-filled wonder at how glad he was to be *here*, experiencing everything. A thankfulness swelling up within him, so great it may cause him to combust; a thankfulness for the world, for the sky, for the earth beneath him and the boy beside him. He tried to remember when he'd last felt like this, and grinned when it came to him easily.

After all, it had only been a week prior—Christmas day.

What normally happened over winter break at Welton was that a Christmas dinner was held, a meagre but merry celebration for the boys who spent their holidays there. Neil, however, as well as Todd (who was also handed out an invitation, during the breakfast of Christmas eve) had had to decline their seats there. They had still helped in the setup, in decorating the dining hall in sashes of sparkling silk and red-ribboned wreaths. But they hadn't spent the night there, nor even the day of.

But instead, after the morning mass had ended and they were free to head out, they'd both immediately taken a bike—and only *one* bike, between the two of them—down to town, the directions almost second nature to Neil by now.

And they had spent their Christmas day at the Danburry's, at the insistence of both Ginny and her father. The former of which had greeted them at the door that day, pulling them both in and out of the cold before yelling out to the rest of her family.

It had been wonderfully cliché in the living room, warm and cozy with a twinkling, baubled pine standing proud atop the Persian rug. The fire had been roaring as everybody congregated to the room, with even *Chet* having made an appearance. The boy had had a white bandage across the bridge of his nose, even though the wound was

definitely healed by now—but as soon as Neil had noticed the fact, Ginny had informed him that Chris would be joining them later that night. So Neil had made it his present to the Danburry boy that he wouldn't point it out.

Ginny had disappeared upstairs for a second, before reappearing holding one of her brother's hand-me-downs. A dusty Santa hat that she'd immediately screwed onto Todd's skull, who'd only laughed as his fair hair poked out mussily from the rim of white fluff. Neil had made it his present to the Danburry's that he would restrain himself, and *not* steal the hat so that Todd could wear it forever.

In reality, though, Neil hadn't brought any actual gifts to the house, which he'd felt terrible about—especially when the Danburry's had pulled a parcel taped in wrapping paper out from under the tree and shoved it into his hands. To say it had been unexpected would be an understatement; Neil hadn't even expected a gift from his *own* parents, a fact which had made the mittens he'd received in the mail that morning from his mother quite the surprise.

Of course, the bigger surprise had come as he'd opened the Danburrys' present, peeling back the covering to reveal a leatherbound collection of Shakespeare's plays. A collection that had to be forced back into his hands for him to accept it, with Neil almost making the mistake of apologising for bringing nothing in return—he'd clocked Ginny's murderous glare just in time, and smartly accepted the family's kindness with only a *little* excess gratitude.

In the evening, they'd had a proper Christmas dinner, toasting and cheering and pulling apart crackers over the veritable *banquet* Mrs. Danburry had prepared. Neil had, halfway through, become embroiled in a game of cards with Chris using a pack she'd won from her Christmas cracker with Chet. They'd all had paper crowns sat atop their heads, even Todd, whose ring of green tissue paper was secured snugly around Chet's old Santa hat. Ginny had then carried on a tradition she'd apparently pioneered the year before, which involved having Todd read out every single joke slip they got to the table—Neil finally understood *why* when he saw the way Todd's face twisted in

repulsion at the cheap wordplay, soon devolving into hysterics with everybody else.

"*The people who write these aren't even* trying," Todd had complained, sidling up to Neil after the last bang of gunpowder had sounded across the dining room.

"*That's the point*," Neil had argued, grinning even as he'd lost his twentieth consecutive game of blackjack to Chris. "*You're supposed to make it funny reading it out*."

"*But— But there's nothing here to even w-work with!*"

Neil had bumped Todd's elbow. "You *did perfectly*."

At that, Ginny had butted in, stabbing at the pair with her fork accusingly. "*Hey*," she'd hissed, simpering. "*If you two want to act like that, there's a perfectly good mistletoe in the hallway—*"

She hadn't gotten much further in that sentence before the Christmas cracker joke strips, once sat beside Todd's plate, had been balled up by the boy and launched at her. She'd squawked as Neil had split his sides laughing, watching Todd's face turn redder than his Santa hat.

Later that night, Neil and Todd had thanked the entire family, before hopping on their bike and making back for Welton—appetites having been sated for the next few days, and spirits having been livened for the next few years. As they'd snuck back to their dorm, notifying staff of their return on the way, Neil had felt a sudden cinch in his stomach. He'd had one last task on his list for the day, and was running out of hours to fulfil it.

So as Todd had left to brush his teeth, Neil had scrounged around under his bed for the package that he knew was there. It was the very same item he'd stashed there, producing it whenever Todd had been away or asleep, so that he could work on the project held therein. The one he'd completed just in time, and in a similar fashion, had managed to produce just as the door swung open and Todd stepped into the room.

"*N-Neil?*" Todd had stuttered, taking in Neil on the floor.

"*Todd!*" Neil had responded, nimbly grabbing the brown-paper package from off of the floorboards and holding it out for Todd. "*Merry Christmas, Todd*."

Todd had placed his toothbrush down gently on Neil's roommate's bedside table—*Todd's* bedside table for the break—and then had reached down to accept the gift. His fingers had traced over Neil's as he'd done it, and Neil *really* should've been used to that by then; he hadn't been, though, and shivered at the sensation.

"*I'm afraid it's not as good as the new notebook the Danburry's got you,*" Neil had prefaced, as Todd began to unpeel the present. "*But I—*"

"*Neil,*" Todd had interjected.

"*Yes, Todd?*"

"*Stop worrying,*" Todd had chided, smile tugging at his lips. "*It'll be perfect.*"

"*And how can you be so sure of that?*"

"*S-Simple*." Todd had looked up before he tore away the final stripe of paper. *"Because y-you gave it to me*."

Neil's gift, in the end, couldn't have been anything expensive. It couldn't have been anything fancy, anything extravagant, anything like what Todd deserved. He'd had only time, and his hands, and the world around him which he still yet inhabited.

"*N-Neil, is this…?*" Todd had held the circlet out in his hands, the tightly-wound twine holding together the twigs, the holly, the evergreen leafage. "*Your—?"*

"*Not exactly,*" Neil had explained, before Todd refused it outright. Which the boy had looked close to doing, holding what he knew was possibly the most important item in Neil's life. "*I, uh— I still have* my *crown. This is a sort of… replica? A complement to it?*" Neil had had to clear his throat as Todd turned it over in his fingers, tracing the tips of them along the craftsmanship. "*I got pretty good at weaving things together, and I still had my 'sticks' left, so… I know it's not enough,* God *it's not enough, but—*"

"*So it's not… yours?*" Todd had cut in.

"*No, but—*"

Todd had held his hands up, silencing Neil. "*G-Good,*" he'd said, fiddling with the wreath in his hands. He'd held it up to the light, making the winterberries glow a fiery red. "*I couldn't accept it, if it w-was. This, though…*" He'd held it out to Neil. "*Will y-you do the honours?*"

Neil had taken it off of the boy, before Todd then leant down. Neil had then placed the crown atop Todd's scalp, and Todd had looked up with an abashed smile.

"*Now we match*," Todd had stated.

"*Now we match*," Neil had echoed.

"*Well, n-now* my *gift looks silly,*" Todd had stammered, playing idly with the sticks and string. Neil hadn't done as good a job as the costume makers at the theatre, and so Todd had managed to pick loose a sprig with his fidgeting.

"*Todd*," Neil had whispered, brushing the sprig out of where it was falling onto the boy's face. He'd tucked it back in with the rest of the woven materials. "*You didn't need to—*"

"*I did.*" Todd had twisted the crown he wore so that it was secured atop his hair, before spinning on his heel. "*Hold on, it's just—*" He'd then knelt down to his bag, rummaging around before he'd found what he'd been looking for. He'd pulled out something Neil had recognised at once, before offering it out to Neil. "*Here*," he'd said. "*Have it.*"

Neil had refused. Of course he'd refused—

But Todd had insisted.

"*You always wanted to see what was in it. And now that I have a new one —*" The boy had pointed behind him, to where his new notebook from the Danburry's was sat at the foot of *his* bed. "*—it's not as if I n-need to*

use it anymore. So I'm giving it to you."

Neil had swallowed. "*Are— Are you sure?*"

And Todd had smiled, as wide and as warm as the sun, as he'd nodded. And then—

And *only* then—

Had Neil accepted the worn, battered notebook from Todd's hands. The very same one that he'd stolen a glance into, all those nights before, the one that had first piqued his curiosity. On that Christmas night, in a chilly room of Welton, Neil had slowly flipped between the same pages he'd glimpsed in what felt like some previous lifetime— seeing all the same writings as before, with even some freshly-scrawled additions towards the end, finishing with…

…a single, neatly torn-out margin, where a page had once been.

And there, Neil had been overwhelmed with that very same feeling that broke over him now. It was familiar this time; where once it had been too much, not even quelled when he'd pulled the other boy in and whispered thank-you's into the crook of his neck, *now* it was a thing easily channelled through the whole of him. He simply enjoyed it, enjoyed *everything*, let it run through his veins like his lifeblood.

"Thank you," he said. He was speaking as much to Todd as he was speaking to the glow of the sun on the water, or the cold edge the breeze still held, or the fates, the universe, the stars. He locked eyes with the other boy, soft powder blue, and he'd said it again. "Thank you."

Todd had laughed, lightly. “What for?” he asked, a little breathless.

Neil fastened his grip on the other boy’s palm, took his other hand and laid it on the back of Todd’s hand. “I mean— For *everything*, Todd. You’re— You’re the reason I’m here today.”

Todd laughed again, also bringing his other hand to meet Neil’s. “No, Neil, I’m not—”

“You *are*,” Neil insisted, raising their joined hands between them. “*You* were the one who spoke up that night, who thought to get Mr. Danburry involved.” Neil felt his chest rise and fall as he inhaled the cold into his lungs. “It was— It was *your* words that were— That I thought of, in my father’s study, when I— When I—”

“No.” Todd was shaking his head. The word was as certain as Neil had ever heard the other boy.

Neil, despite the memories, felt a smile creep onto his face. “No…?” he echoed. “What— What do you mean, no?”

Todd moved his gaze back up to Neil’s, piercing and focused. “*No*. I m-might’ve— I might’ve helped plan everything, along with your friends, of course, but… But that isn’t why you’re here today, Neil.” Todd rubbed his thumb over Neil’s knuckles, little circles of touch, feather-light. “It— It was *you* who did that, d-don’t you know? It was *y-you* who made the most important decision, Neil.”

Neil listed his head to the side. As if the minute change in angle would help him understand, would explain the other boy’s words to him. “And… that was…?”

Todd turned, looking over the lake, looking over at the everything else. He chewed on his lip, inhaling, exhaling, before finally speaking.

“You chose to live.”

Neil opened his mouth to say something.

But closed it just as quick.

Because, really—

What was there left to say?

Todd’s eyes had fallen to the floor, and he shuffled his feet back and forth. It was him who broke the silence, catching Neil’s attention.

“N-Neil. Look.”

Neil looked at where Todd’s eyes directed him. Beneath their feet, breaking through the snow, stark against the sea of iridescent white, he saw—

He saw a flower. A single bloom of bright petals, spread out between their shoes, pushing up through the powder. A solitary star of purple, a lone pinprick in a sky of velvety pearl, an oasis of life amidst the wintry scene. It was only a small flower, but to Neil—

To Neil it was a reminder. A reminder with a short, green stem, that

just across the horizon was *spring*. That under all the snow, past the emptied foliage, beyond the hanging grey clouds—

There was *grass*. There were trees bedecked with leaves, summer fruit weighing down the boughs with their sweetness. There was sunlight, brilliant and balmy in the daytime; there was moonlight, dancing in the ripples of a brook in the nighttime.

Todd caught Neil's eye, gesturing to the splash of purple at their feet. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said, swivelling around to take in the picture-perfect pocket of the world they inhabited—if only for however long it lasted.

Neil turned away from the flower, from the light cast on the lake water, from the perfectly snowed hills. He focused on Todd, on the feeling of his hands on his. On the future, the one he might have now, on the promise of another tomorrow. Here, finally, there were no deadlines, no time constraints, no ticking clocks—none that mattered, anyway. Not to them *here*, not to them *now*.

Neil smiled.

"Yes," he breathed, not taking his eyes off of Todd. "It is."

End Notes

ok now THATS a WRAP.

And we're finishing it as it lived... updated at 5am on a monday morning....

This has been a journey. This fic took me more than half a year to finish, and this story's been in my notes app for longer than that. I know that's not much time but it's a lot of time for me, especially for writing. I did a lot in the upwards of 7 months I worked on this for, including starting uni, which you probably know, because i love to yap in the chapter notes. This fic took me way longer than I thought it would take, too, (see the chapter count being updated like three times) but hey! It all worked out in the end because GUESS WHAT ALBUM CAME OUT EXACTLY A YEAR AGO... YESTERDAY!!! All planned, it was all planned.

I'd like to thank all of you who stuck around, who kudos'd, who commented (I read and love all of your comment I swear I'm just bad a replying sometimes), who honestly just read the thing. It's 140k words, if you're here, thanks for getting through all that. The support I've gotten has been really nice and I can't convey it in words <3 <3 <3. Not concisely, anyway...

I'm never writing something this long again. I'm joking, but I'm not gonna write something long for a bit, and I'm probably not gonna do it week by week again. I AM gonna be finishing up all the oneshots that have been gathering in my notes app, though, and hey! Some of them are evenb DPS fics if thats interesting to you which I would be confused if it wasn't. This fic opened my eyes to knarlie, that was supposed to be BACKGROUND development but I liked writing it too much so oops, so expect more of that...

ok that's enough ramling. Thank you so much again :)))))))))))) and bye. If you haven't listened to charm yet or even just one clairo song I've failed.....

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!